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Teaching Critical Literacy in a Higher Education Institution in a Gulf State

By

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Abstract

This thesis provides an analytical account of the design, teaching and evaluation of an optional critical literacy course in a higher education institution in a Gulf state. This study set out to address the following research questions: 1) How can one foster critical literacy in students where there are distinct constraints on the freedom of expression and action? 2) To what extent do student and teacher perceptions of critical literacy change throughout the taught course? 3) In what ways, and to what degree, was the course successful in teaching analytical and critical reading? Students' reactions to, and evaluation of, the course and their perceptions of its value in terms of their analytical skills and critical literacy development were sought throughout.

Critical literacy deals with issues of power and social justice. Part of its purpose is to empower the disempowered. As such, teaching critical literacy in any context has associated risks, but taking ahead a research and development project in this geographical context revealed sociopolitical and cultural challenges that have not been considered sufficiently to date in the literature on critical literacy. My research took the form of an action research project, as I designed a course using critical pedagogy to teach students first the analytical skills required to engage with texts before introducing the additional elements which characterize a critical literacy approach. This particular approach was adopted as students had had very little prior experience of textual analysis. Two cohorts of students enrolled on the course, one taught by me and the other by a colleague.

Data were collected throughout the 16-week course that included pre- and post-course survey questionnaires with students; pre- and post-course interviews with my colleague; analysis of students' classwork and assessments across both cohorts; weekly team meetings; and my reflective journal. The data were analysed using thematic analysis to answer the study's research questions.

The key findings were that sociopolitical and cultural constraints limited the type of texts that could be incorporated into the course. They also placed

restrictions on class discussions at times. There are also certain virtues and skills required of teachers when teaching critical literacy in this and similar contexts. However, despite these challenges the course did achieve success in teaching analysis and critical literary to students, as significant achievements were evident in their classroom contributions, their on-going work and in their assessments. There is also the potential for the course that was designed, following some minor improvements, to be implemented in other higher educational institutions across the Gulf region, (e.g. United Arab Emirates), by practitioners interested in teaching critical literacy to their students.

The importance of teaching textual analysis is emphasized in this study, as these foundations had to be put in place before the teaching of critical literacy could commence. Currently, the literature on critical literacy does not discuss this in much detail. There is a need in future theorizing on critical literacy to consider how its principles could be framed in a way that takes account of the sociopolitical context in which students and teachers have to operate; and similarly for work on critical literacy to consider more closely the affordances and constraints of different contexts.

Lay Summary

This thesis covers how a practitioner in a higher educational institute in the Kingdom of Bahrain set out to teach analysis and critical literacy skills to students. Critical literacy is about the way in which we engage with texts, requiring the reader to ask questions of the text, consider it from different points of view, and think about what might have been left out (intentionally or unintentionally) of the text. It is usually quite political and promotes social change. These aspects of critical literacy serve to empower the reader, often giving voices to people who may be marginalised in society.

The project undertook in this thesis required the researcher to design a course that taught Bahraini students analytical and critical literacy skills. It was necessary to teach textual analysis skills first because without this foundation, it is very difficult to teach critical literacy. A range of different texts, from advertisements and picture books to film and animation were used throughout the course. The course was delivered by the researcher and another tutor, who had very limited knowledge of critical literacy prior to the course. The data collected included pre- and post-course interviews with the other course tutor, conversations during our weekly meetings, pre- and post-course survey questionnaires completed by the students enrolled on the course, students classwork and assessment submissions, and reflections recorded in my reflective journal.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This study has set out to apply the theory and practice of critical literacy to a higher educational context in the Kingdom of Bahrain. A new course with a focus on critical literacy was developed to enable students - who chose to enrol on the course - to engage with texts on a much deeper level, thus providing a more meaningful learning experience and one that could be applied both within and outwith the students' academic lives. It aimed to assist students to negotiate successfully the myriad of different texts that we are all constantly bombarded with on a daily basis. When students can read a text critically, they become empowered as readers, since texts and their producers set out to manipulate them and position them in certain ways.

My interest in the subject of critical literacy has its roots in my Master's degree where I was first introduced to the theory as part of my TESOL programme. I went on to make it the focus of my dissertation, where I examined how a popular Arabic animation cartoon could be used to 'bridge the gap' between Eastern and Western audiences through using a critical literacy framework. Different writers define critical literacy in slightly different ways, and this shall be detailed in the literature review. A brief definition of critical literacy is that it requires students to explore the text beyond what is presented to them. This includes challenging the text through asking questions and situating the text in a socio-cultural context. Critical literacy is the manner in which a reader engages with a text, taking into account socio-cultural perspectives; gender and race issues; and political contexts, to name but a few. A critical literacy approach requires readers to ask questions of the text rather than be passive recipients of information. It concerns itself with issues of power and seeks to readdress what is often a power imbalance by providing a voice to those who have been silenced. In becoming critically literate, the reader is able to consider the text from multiple perspectives, identify gaps and silences, propose alternative

readings of the text and situate it in a wider context with regard to socio-cultural and/or political factors. A more in-depth exploration of critical literacy and an outline of some of the key debates that surround it will follow in the literature review.

Following a review of the literature on critical literacy, gaps in the literature were identified. These were regarding the geographical context, specifically the absence of critical literacy studies in the region of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC – a group of countries in the region consisting of Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar and Oman). There was also little attention given to teaching critical literacy in more delicate political contexts, that require careful selection of texts and management of discussions. A further gap was how to teach critical literacy when students have very limited analytical skills. These gaps formed part of the motivation for this project and also helped shape my research questions.

The Kingdom of Bahrain

Setting out first the context of the study, general information will be provided on the Kingdom of Bahrain. Bahrain is a small, independent island located in the Persian Gulf, just off the coast of Saudi Arabia, to which it is connected by a causeway. Bahrain has a population of approximately 1.4 million (2018) and is ruled by a monarch. It is an Islamic country and the majority of Bahraini citizens are Muslim (99.8%). The language of the country is Arabic and all government elementary and secondary schools use Arabic as the language of instruction. This is not the case with the majority of higher educational institutes, however, where English is the predominant language of instruction.

It is necessary to provide some information on the political situation in Bahrain to contextualize the research. The first thing to note is that Bahrain is an absolute monarchy, ruled by King Hamad bin Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa, who is responsible for appointing both the Prime Minister and the Cabinet. The Prime

Minister is the Uncle of the King, and he has been in office since 1970. The ruling family are Sunni but the majority of the population (70%) are Shia[1]. This has caused tensions in the country which has led to unrest at times.

Although it occurred eight years ago, the Arab Spring of 2011 is still relatively fresh in the minds of the Bahraini people. The divide in Bahrain is between the Shia majority, who feel they are being unfairly discriminated against, and the ruling Sunni minority. In February 2011, an uprising by the predominantly Shia population took place in the country's capital, Manama. In a report at the time by BBC News, the protesters were cited as "calling for a new constitution, the release of hundreds of Shia men and boys who had been rounded up since August 2010 and an end to civil rights abuses."[2]. On the 14th February 2011, forces from Saudi Arabia (an ally of Bahrain), who had been invited into the country by the ruling regime, opened fire on the allegedly unarmed protesters. This was met with condemnation by the Western world but within Bahrain the attack had the desired effect and the protesters dispersed. However, throughout the years, protests have regularly occurred in certain Shia villages, usually resulting in violent clashes with the police force where the use of tear gas is not uncommon. The British Embassy in Bahrain continues to issue warnings on its official Facebook page regarding "unauthorised protests" that take place frequently around the island.

Bahrain's Education System

Introduction

In 1919, Bahrain became the first country in the GCC to establish its education system, and was the first to enrol females in 1928[3]. The country currently has a compulsory education system for boys and girls aged 6-14 years. The Government schools are free for both Bahraini's and non-Bahraini's and are

[1] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14540571
[2] http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-12471243
[3] http://www.bh.undp.org/content/bahrain/en/home/mdgoverview/overview/mdg2.html

segregated according to gender[4]. In 2005/6, 24.7% of pupils at the primary level, 18.6% of students at the intermediate level, and 14.1% of students at the secondary level were educated in the private sector.[5] The education system in presided over by the Ministry of Education (MoE).

Who are the teachers?

Bahrain Teachers College (BTC) is a sub-division of the University of Bahrain. The process of becoming a teacher is similar to that of the UK. Students can choose to enroll in the Bachelor of Education (Bed), a 4-year programme or the Post-graduate Diploma of Education (PGDE), a one-year programme. To be accepted at the BTC for the available courses, one is required to satisfy the following criteria:

- Meet the general admissions requirements of the University of Bahrain;
- Be a Bahraini national;
- Be a graduate of at least the last two academic years;
- Have achieved 80% and above in General Secondary certificate or the accepted equivalent from a private school in Bahrain,* if they are applying for the Bachelors programmes;
- Have achieved 2.67 CGPA or above in a university degree, if they are applying for the Post Graduate Diploma Programme[6].

Kindergarten

Many students attend Kindergarten classes (age 3-6) but these are run by the private sector.

Primary School

The primary stage consists of grades 1-6 for 6-11 year olds. The curriculum is taught in Arabic and, from 2000-2001, students were taught English language from grade 3 where they had two 50-minute periods per week. In grades 4-6,

[4] http://www.cio.gov.bh/cio_eng/English/Publications/Reports/English%202010%2010%2012.pdf
[5] http://www.ibe.unesco.org/Countries/WDE/2006/ARAB_STATES/Bahrain/Bahrain.pdf
[6] http://www.btc.uob.edu.bh/contents.aspx?id=922ddafa-594e-e211-a2f6-0022191ecece&gid=4

this increased to five 50-minute periods per week. However, from 2009/10, students from grade 1-6 have been taught English on a daily basis. In order to progress to the next stage, students in grade 6 must pass examinations in Arabic language, English Language, Maths and Science. Enrolment in primary education is 99%.[7]

The Intermediate Stage

The intermediate stage comprises grades 7-9, for 12-14 year olds. Subjects studied include Islamic Education, Arabic language, English Language (five 50-minute periods per week), Science and Technology, Maths, Social Studies, Handicrafts and P.E. Upon completion of grade 9, students are again examined in Arabic, English, Maths and Science.

The Secondary Stage

Students who opt to continue their education enter into the secondary stage, which is for 15-17 year olds. The purpose of this is to prepare students for either entry into higher education or into the workforce. In 2012, the secondary school day was extended by 45 minutes, thereby increasing teaching time. Students used to select a particular study path from the following: Scientific, Literary, Commercial, Technical or Applied (the latter includes Textiles and Clothing and is limited to females only, in addition to Agriculture and Livestock Resources; Hotel Business and Printed advertisement[8]). Both the literacy and scientific tracks consist of the following core courses: Arabic Language; English Language; Islamic Education; Science; Maths; Social Studies; Physical Education and Family Life education. However, this has meant that students were limited to what they could study in Higher education depending on their choice of track. There is now a unified track so that students can select any specialisation when they attend university. The number of credit hours required for graduation is 156 hours for all tracks except the technical, which requires 210 credit hours.[9]

[7] http://www.cio.gov.bh/cio_eng/English/Publications/Reports/English%202010%2010%2012.pdf
[8] http://www.ibe.unesco.org/Countries/WDE/2006/ARAB_STATES/Bahrain/Bahrain.pdf
[9] http://www.ibe.unesco.org/International/ICE/natrap/BahrainEn.pdf

Enrolment is 89%[10]. On successful completion of the Secondary stage students are awarded their Secondary School Certificate (*Thanawiya*); a minimum score of 50% must be attained by the students for this award:

> Various evaluation methods are used, including oral, written and practical tests according to the nature of each track, or research papers and reports. The evaluation addresses, besides academic attainment, the track-related activity, extent of interaction with the teacher inside the class, and performance of assigned home works.[11]

This certificate is a pre-requisite to enter into tertiary education.

The National Examinations

In addition, the government also conducts a National Examination annually (introduced in 2009) and although these results are not connected to the *Thanawiya,* their purpose is "to provide information about the performance of students on broad divisions of subject content based on the competencies in the National Curriculum and to provide information on performance on different question types." *(*http://www.iaea.info/documents/paper_4d227b42.pdf)

Grades/Subject	Arabic	English	Problem Solving (Arabic)
Level A (100 - 90)	0%	2%	0%
Level B (89 - 80)	3%	2%	0%
Level C (79 - 70)	7%	3%	0%
Level D (69 - 60)	12%	4%	1%
Level E (59 - 50)	16%	6%	3%
Level U (49 - 0)	62%	83%	96%

http://www.qqa.edu.bh/en/Reports/NationalExaminationReports_Results/Pages/NEUGrade12.aspx

It is assumed that the percentages noted above are the number of students who achieved the stated percentage in each exam. This table, sourced from the National Authority for Qualifications & Quality Assurance of Education and Training

[10] http://www.cio.gov.bh/cio_eng/English/Publications/Reports/English%202010%2010%2012.pdf
[11] http://www.ibe.unesco.org/International/ICE/natrap/BahrainEn.pdf

(established in 2008) clearly depicts the problems students face in learning English in Government schools, given that 83% failed. There is a major problem with the school system, as illustrated by the fact that 96% of students scored below 50% on problem solving in Arabic. UNESCO commented that:

> The development of students' analytical and critical thinking skills and their ability to work and learn independently is only satisfactory or inadequate in the great majority of schools. Almost half of schools do not develop these skills sufficiently, which in turn impacts standards and achievement. The teacher-dominated approach in many lessons creates student dependency on the teacher. This creates a gap in relation to preparing students with the independent learning skills needed for higher education and employment.[12]

This gap is what confronts tutors when students are entering into tertiary education, hence the need for Foundation study programmes, as detailed in the forthcoming section on higher education.

Higher Education in Bahrain

Tertiary education was not introduced to Bahrain until 1968 and the first University was established in 1980. There are currently three government higher educational institutes in Bahrain, one regional and thirteen private institutes. The type of institute in which this study takes place will remain anonymous, to avoid its identification due to the small number of higher educational establishments on the island. It will thus be known as Institute X. Despite this precaution, it is still possible that the institute will be easily identifiable based on the amount of information that will have to be disclosed during this study. This is problematic and will be addressed under ethical considerations.

Institute X

Institute X was established by royal decree in 2008. The motivation was to fill a perceived gap in the workforce by producing skilled, work-ready Bahraini graduates. There are six degree courses offered. Entry requirements require students to submit a secondary school graduate certificate and to have achieved

[12] http://www.ibe.unesco.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Publications/WDE/2010/pdf-versions/Bahrain.pdf

a Grade Point Average (GPA) of 70% or more throughout their secondary school experience. Entry tests are conducted by the Institute that measure each student's English and Math ability. These determine not only whether students are accepted but also, if their result is at the required standard, whether they are admitted directly to their degree programme of choice, or first spend a year in the general foundation programme. The Institute caters almost exclusively to Bahrainis, and the student fees seem to act as a gate-keeping device to ensure this is the case: there are two semesters each academic year and Bahraini students pay 120 Bahrain Dinars (BD) per semester, while non-Bahraini's are charged 2,520 BD per semester. Most students fulfil the requirements of their degree programme in four to five years. Regardless of their degree, all students must take three courses (45 credits) from the Electives programme. This falls under the Department of General Studies. The number of Elective courses students have to choose from varies each semester. The course on critical literacy that I developed was offered to students as an Elective course. My motivation for developing this Elective will be outlined below.

My Background

For one semester each academic year, I teach English for Academic Purposes (EAP) on the Foundation course as part of the Foundation (pre-degree) programme. This is a mandatory one-year programme that acts as a pre-requisite to degree level study for students who do not meet either the Math requirements and/or the English requirements in the entrance examinations. There are two levels of EAP courses (1 and 2) and each one is taught over a 16-week period, with 10 contact hours per week. During the second semester, I teach on the Electives programme. The electives comprise a variety of specialised courses that are designed internally by tutors. They also run over a 16-week period, with 4-5 contact hours per week and upon passing each course students gain 15 credits. Before graduation, students must gain 45 credits from the Electives programme. I created an elective that teaches critical literacy and is informed by critical pedagogies and critical literacy theory. The students who were eligible to enrol on this course had completed the Foundation EAP level 2

course, but most are expected to be degree level students, who were also enrolled in higher-level English language courses.

The maximum class size across the institution is twenty students. The mandatory English courses, which students study alongside their degree subjects, incorporate the basic skills of reading, listening, writing and speaking in their learning objectives and outcomes. However, as the literature review will demonstrate, these basic skills are no longer enough for an individual to be deemed 'literate,' according to current conceptualisations and definitions of literacy, and of what it means to be literate. For the research project reported in this thesis I devised, delivered, assessed and evaluated a reading course which was centrally informed by critical literacy and critical pedagogical theories, in order to assist students with their current studies and to contribute to their employability skills, in terms of them becoming more global citizens. This is because by mastering the skill of critical reading literacy, students can come to understand the importance of language in: "the workings of power; producing our identity positions; affecting who gets access to opportunities for a better life" (Janks 2014:1). It is therefore possible to state that this research aimed to make two central contributions to current knowledge: 1) despite an exhaustive search of the academic literature, there appeared to be no documented evidence of critical reading literacy being taught in Bahrain or any other Gulf states – neither at the elementary nor high school level in government schools, nor in higher education - I was investigating it in a new context 2) Through framing critical reading literacy in a second language context I was taking a new approach as there has been very little work done in this area so far – the second language literature has been hesitant to include such an approach. Pursuing both these contributions allowed me to make a more 'general' contribution to the critical literacy literature and to pedagogical practices in critical literacy.

Action Research

I chose action research as the research approach to this project for a number of reasons. The main reason was that teaching critical literacy can be viewed by

some as being controversial. I felt that it would be more reassuring for the other teacher who was teaching the course with me if I was also teaching the material that I had designed. Action research allows the researcher to participate directly in the research through being a practitioner, in contrast to observing from the outside. I also wanted to experience personally teaching the course, and interacting with students first hand. Furthermore, I am a practitioner and my belief is that we learn by doing. Teaching the course afforded me the opportunity to be reflective and reflexive and provided valuable data. I was able to support the other course tutor and we were able to share our experiences with each other, which I feel made her more open. This two-way dialogue enriched the data as we had the perspectives of two tutors with two separate cohorts of students.

Research Questions

The following research questions have been addressed in this action research project:

1) How can one foster critical literacy in students where there are distinct constraints on the freedom of expression and action?
2) To what extent do student and teacher perceptions of critical literacy change throughout the taught course?
3) In what ways, and to what degree, was the course successful in teaching analytical and critical reading?

In the final research question, by 'critical reading' I mean that the students engage in reading using a critical literacy framework. This thesis will begin by providing an overview of the most relevant literature, including the move from being literate to being critically literate. Definitions of key terms being used throughout this thesis will be provided. The Literature Review chapter will focus on the most pertinent studies regarding critical literacy and critical pedagogy, but also contextualise these through a discussion of sociocultural theory. Approaches to the teaching of critical literacy in different countries will

be outlined. The literature on curriculum design and evaluation theory will also be explored.

The methodology chapter will discuss, and present a rationale for, the research approach and the design frame used for this project, and how the data were collected in order to answer the research questions. Validity and trustworthiness of the research will be discussed, as will my own reflexivity. The research design will be presented. The course, its context and the theoretical perspectives that informed the course design will be explained. A detailed review of decisions that informed the choices of texts used in the course and the design of the assessments will be provided. Finally, ethical considerations and decisions will be discussed and justified.

Next, the key findings will be presented thematically and what careful analysis of the data revealed will be discussed. These themes included challenges and achievements; selection of texts; student engagement; and pedagogical approaches. Each of these themes will be given extensive attention.

The discussion will consider carefully the implications of the findings for education. The research questions will be answered fully, and the limitations of the research project will be acknowledged. Areas for future research and development will also be contemplated.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

This chapter provides a critical review of the literature. It begins by defining key terms, before looking at conceptions of reading and literacy. Sociocultural theories on literacy will then be examined. Critical literacy and critical pedagogy are discussed, The training that teachers in English as a Second Language undertake is also covered, as is how reading is approached in the English as a Second Language curriculum. Next, relevant studies of critical literacy are included. The review then moves to curriculum development and evaluation theory, as these were central areas of the project. The literature presented here will be referred back to at later points in the thesis where appropriate.

Definitions

Before considering these topics, it is necessary first to set out how key terms are being understood and deployed within this thesis. While the term 'text' is often used to refer to only the written word on the page, its definition has developed over time to become much broader. When I refer to 'text' in this thesis, I am not simply alluding to the written word on the page. Text denotes anything that communicates meaning, and I therefore use this word in this sense. It incorporates printed forms but also multimedia forms, for example, advertisements found on the internet.

The following paragraphs centre on the definition of critical literacy because I want to be clear about how I am using this term and what it means. A concise definition of what the term 'critical literacy' means is provided by the *Critical Literacy Journal* editors:

> We propose a definition of critical literacy as an educational practice that emphasises the connections between language, knowledge, power and subjectivities[13].

[13] www.criticalliteracyjournal.org

This definition embraces the key elements of critical literacy but a more precise classification was required for the purposes of this study. In terms of the learner, Janks (2014) asserts that once you are critically literate:

> you will understand how important language is in: the workings of power; producing our identity positions; affecting who gets access to opportunities for a better life (1).

Learners achieve this understanding through analysis, questioning and evaluating the text, in addition to exploring the intentions of those who constructed the text. It could be said that this is a full exploration of the text, rather than a simple surface reading of it, as the reader is required to deconstruct the text and eventually formulate their own opinion on the subject/topic. It then follows that the reader transforms or reconstructs the text, through what Janks (2014) terms a process of redesign. This acts to empower the reader and is a crucial stage of critical literacy, as it is not solely about deconstruction (Luke, 2012; Shor, 2012).

Critical thinking is not the same thing as critical literacy; however, in some of the literature these terms are used interchangeably. This is problematic as it obviously leads to some confusion. I see them as two uniquely different concepts, rather than synonyms of each other. Burbules and Berk (1999) suggest that:

> For the critical thinker, people do not sufficiently analyse the reasons by which they live, do not examine the assumptions, commitments and logic of daily life (46).

Critical thinking definitely does not have the political concern that critical literacy does, nor does it explore issues of empowerment within society. The term critical thinking will not be used in this thesis.

What is reading?

Reading is a complex process in both L1 and L2, which requires the reader to master a number of different reading skills and strategies; and the reader needs a different skill set to read in each language, Arabic and English. For example, in

Arabic one reads from right to left, using a very different script from that employed in English. Defining reading is therefore a very difficult task. However, the most simple definition of reading is that the reader is able to understand the text that they are presented with. In L2 contexts this seems to focus on the comprehension model, as will be detailed in the next section. The *Programme for International Student Assessment* (PISA) provide the following definition of reading:

> Reading literacy is understanding, using, reflecting on and engaging with written texts, in order to achieve one's goals, to develop one's knowledge and potential, and to participate in society (PISA, 2016: 9[14]).

In explaining what 'written texts' refers to, PISA state that they are "coherent texts in which language is used in its graphic form: hand-written, printed, and on-screen. These texts do not include aural language artefacts such as voice-recordings; nor do they include film, TV, animated visuals, or pictures without words." (10). This suggests that learners cannot read an image for example, thus ignoring the importance of visual signs and signifiers, which is problematic. I will be using a much broader definition of texts in my research, and widening the ESL notion of reading to include both the cognitive and social aspects of reading.

By referring to the reader's ability to participate in society, the importance of learners taking a "critical stance" (11) in their reading is being emphasised. This points to the significance of critical literacy (which will be discussed further in a later section), as emphasised by Grabe and Stoller (2011):

> To become skilled readers, students need to develop abilities to, among others decode, make meaning, apply reading strategies, use background knowledge, establish goals, motivation, evaluate, integrate and synthesise information for critical reading comprehension (131).

This shows that reading is more than simply understanding language. The reader has to make sense of the whole text.

[14] https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/PISA-2018-draft-frameworks.pdf

What is literacy?

The most basic definition of literacy is the ability to read and write. But as Bernardo (2000) points out, "literacy does not simply involve being able to read and to write printed language; instead, it is now viewed as an activity that largely involves extracting and processing complex meanings from texts and other printed forms of language" (457). The *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization* (UNESCO) has declared that everyone has the right to become literate. Those who are deprived of access to literacy are thus being denied a civil liberty. Different writers and scholars have produced their own definitions of what it means to be literate. In Australia, the term literacy refers to "particular skills, namely the ability to understand and use various forms of print and digital text in day-to-day activities at home, at work, and in the community" (Australian Council for Adult Literacy, 2001:7). An official definition from America is that: "literacy is the ability to use written and printed information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential" (National Centre for Educational Statistics, n.d.). In its 2006 *Education for All Global Monitoring Report*[15], UNESCO stands by its 1978 definition of functional literacy that states "a person is functionally literate who can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his group and community and also for enabling him to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his own and the community's development" (154). However, over the decades, this limited concept of literacy has evolved further, and UNESCO acknowledged in their 2006 report that they have come to "distinguish between literacy as a skill and literacy as a set of culturally and socially determined practices" (154). The complex nature of 'literacy' was also recognised by L1 literacy researchers:

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[15] http://www.unesco.org/education/GMR2006/full/chapt6_eng.pdf

> *Literacy* is a remarkable term. While it seems to refer simply to individual possession of the complementary mental technologies of reading and writing, literacy is difficult to define in individuals and to delimit within societies, and the term itself is charged with emotional and political meaning (Wagner 1983:5).

This emotional and political meaning that Wagner alludes to highlights the gulf between functional literacy (what was foregrounded as important in the past) and critical literacy (where we are presently). It has been recognised for decades that "Literacy is a platform for democratization and a vehicle for the promotion of cultural and national identity" (United Nations, 1997). But within some Second Language teaching contexts, it is still seen largely as a cognitive process rather than a social practice. This is evident from English language proficiency tests, for example IELTS (International English Language Testing System) and TOFEL (Test of English as a Foreign Language). These are used as benchmarks for individuals usually entering into higher education, and the reading sections of these examinations focus on understanding main ideas and supporting details, and vocabulary items.

What is a text?

Although the definition of 'text' that is used in this thesis has been outlined briefly in an earlier section, consideration also has to be given to genres of text that can be used to teach analysis skills and critical literacy. Picturebooks (Senokossoff, 2013; Turner, 2014; Lee, 2015; Callow, 2017), fairytales (Wee, Kim & Lee, 2017; Bourke, 2008), novels, film (Stuckey & Kring, 2007; Hodges, 2010; Lim & Tan, 2018), advertisements (Esposito, 2011), and fake news (Comber & Grant, 2018) are genres of text that have featured in the literature on teaching critical literacy. Visual literacies are also now central to teaching critical literacy because of the manner in which meaning-making takes place. Visual literacy was a phrase created by John Debes (1969; in Avgerinou & Ericson 1997), partly in response to the rise of the television culture. Over the next few decades, there was a continued struggle to produce an appropriate definition of visual literacy (Ausburn & Ausburn, 1978; Hortin, 1983; Curtiss, 1987). Without wanting to simplify the concept of visual literacy, it is widely

agreed in the current literature that it involves the reading of the image. Serafini (2014) succinctly states that there are five different stages that the reader has to engage with to successfully read the image. First, the recognition that visual literacy is a social and cognitive process. Then, that the reader is required to engage in the process of generating interpretations. Thirdly, visual literacy requires the reader to work across a variety of modes. Next, that readers should consider the text from a variety of theoretical perspectives, and finally, that the reader has an awareness of sociocultural contexts. The order in which these occur is not important, but the latter stage points to how visual literacy can be pursued more critically. Avgerinou & Ericson (1997) were urging teachers to nurture and develop visual literacy in their students more than two decades ago and were contemplating why there was not more emphasis being placed on this in education. Perhaps it was because teaching visual literacy is a complex process.

Now, in addition to being competent in visual literacy, readers need to have critical visual literacy skills. This is of central importance, because as Gee (in Serafini: 2014) points out: "without critical and analytical skills a multimodal world of games, ads, news and other media is a world where it is easier than ever to lie, scam, dupe, and manipulate people" (xi). Readers have to be visually literate within a critical framework so that they can protect themselves against some of the scenarios Gee refers to. This also applies to teaching the critical viewing of films; Lim & Tan (2018) suggest why it is so important for students to learn how to read these types of texts:

> We cannot assume that just because our young are growing up in a media-rich world, they will be able to view multimodal representations critically and not be naïve consumers of media texts (291).

This is an area that educators need to address in their teaching. All of the genres listed in the above paragraph were used in my course, and further details of this are given in chapter 3.

Sociocultural Theory

Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural approach to learning is in large part based on social interaction being a major contributor to cognitive development. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978) charts the student's move from being a dependent learner towards becoming a more independent learner. This was reflected in my course design, with the opening weeks being heavily scaffolded (as it was expected that students would have limited analytical skills and almost no experience of critical literacy). Teaching was supported by weekly meetings with the other course tutor in which we discussed our observations of students' learning and how students were engaging with, and responding to, the activities/tasks. Students were given increased autonomy as they progressed through the course and the culmination of their independent learning was evident in the final weeks with their problem-based learning project.

Sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) is also about how social and cultural contexts influence the learning process. Learners already possess knowledge and beliefs that they bring with them when engaging with reading and engaging with a text. From a cultural perspective, these preconceptions are usually based on stereotypes, and it is therefore important for learners to challenge these in a text. Part of the tutor role was encouraging students to develop particular capabilities and ways of being to help them cope with the current world, for example through internationalisation and grassroots cultural exchange. This was happening through choice of text and exposure to other cultures through these texts, as well as encouraging them to reflect on their own identities and their sense of 'self'.

Although the teacher – student relationship is significant for learning to take place, student – student dialogue and discussion are equally important. This is because students can learn from each other through their interactions, which reflects Vgotsky's accounts of the importance of social interaction for learning.

This is the idea that each individual has their own unique viewpoint from which they begin their analysis of text. Rogoff (1990) also discusses peer-learning, in the form of guided participation. It is for this reason that group discussions played a central role in my course. In a theoretical paper John-Steiner and Mahn (1996), discuss social interaction in terms of its contribution to learning:

> In our view, internalization is simultaneously an individual and a social process. In working with, through, and beyond what they have appropriated in social participation and then internalized, individuals construct new knowledge (197).

This quotation points up why class discussions and group work are so important in teaching, in terms of contributing to student learning, but more specifically in teaching critical literacy.

Sociocultural theories of literacy

Literacy has progressed from being regarded as a set of skills to being viewed as a set of socio-cultural practices. Perry (2012) details what she calls the three major sociocultural theories of literacy. These are: literacy as social practice; multi-literacies; and critical literacy (52). She contends that 'in answer to the question "what is literacy?," theorists of literacy as a social practice would say that literacy is what people *do* with reading, writing and texts in real world contexts and why they do it' (54). Multi-literacies concern themselves with the ideology of power relationships in literacy. They emphasise multimodality, which includes digital technologies. Theorists of multi-literacies though believe that in thinking about what literacy is, one also has to consider how it is taught. For the theory of critical literacy, Perry cites Freire (2001), who defines literacy as "a process of conscientizacao, or consciousness, which means taking the printed word, connecting it to the world, and then using that for purposes of empowerment" (60).

Literacy now embodies a complex set of practices. "Literacy is therefore not viewed as simply reading or writing in a functional sense, but as a set of social practices where students engage in a critical reflection and examination of the world in which they live" (Foley 2016:4). Having a purely surface understanding

of texts is no longer acceptable in a growing number of societies. It therefore has to be asked why in the second language English classroom the focus still tends to be on Communicative Language Teaching (Wallace, 2003). Practitioners still generally tend to focus on developing language for everyday communicative purposes. Although reading forms a part of this, the reading tasks are usually centred around basic comprehension and the learning of new vocabulary. They fail to engage learners in critical examination of texts. This point is also reflected in the final Government issued English examination that Bahraini high school students sit.

New Literacy Studies (NLS)

This movement started in the 1980s and refers to a body of work that revoked the view that literacy was a purely cognitive process. The New Literacy Studies (NLS) represent a move away from the traditional cognitive view of literacy to a sociocultural perspective on literacy. (Gee, nd; Street, 2003) "The NLS are based on the view that reading and writing only make sense when studied in the context of social and cultural (and we can add historical, political, and economic) practices of which they are but a part"[16]. I agree with this statement as I believe that texts cannot be studied in isolation. It should be emphasised here that the approach advocated by those who adhere to NLS should not be in place of, but in addition to, the cognitive approach. It is my belief that the two can, and should, coexist together, and are of equal importance. One cannot take precedence over the other:

> NLS, then, takes nothing for granted with respect to literacy and the social practices with which it becomes associated, problematizing what counts as literacy at any time and place and asking "whose literacies" are dominant and whose are marginalized or resistant (Street, 2003: 77).

This is an important point to consider, especially when designing a new course; and to my mind the fact that I am a 'foreigner' in this context is of particular

16 jamespaulgee.com/geeimg/pdfs/The%20New%20Literacy%20Studies%20and%20the%20Social%20Turn.pdf

importance. For example, in my own teaching context in Bahrain the majority of tutors are of Western origin. We are therefore more inclined to select texts from a Western canon, (this is evident through examination of our curriculum), probably because of our familiarity with these texts, rather than taking a more multi-cultural approach to literacy. However, it is not just about the selection of texts but about how these texts are utilised in the classroom.

In a critical reading approach, Luke & Freebody's Four Resource Model sets out the four roles of the reader as being: code-breaker, meaning maker, text user and text critic. Luke & Freebody label these as "a family of practices" (1999: 3). They do not exist independently of one another but rather function as a whole:

> We wanted to shift the focus from trying to find the right method to determining whether the range of practices emphasized in a reading program was indeed covering and integrating the broad repertoire of textual practices required in today's economies and cultures (Luke & Freebody, 1999: 3).

In the past, readers were only required to make sense of the written word on the page. However, since the beginning era of the internet, people have access to and/or are exposed to a much wider variety of texts at a much higher frequency, including advertisements, social media and videos. Also, these texts transcend the geographical boundaries of individual countries, resulting in a level of internationalization that requires the reader to consider different cultural perspectives and contexts. Some practitioners, for example Alyousef (2006), are of the belief that teaching second language students strategies that enable them to adopt a more critical stance towards texts can only be achieved at a more advanced level (Alyousef, 2006).

The New London Group was also part of the NLS movement. Their focus was on multiliteracies, and: "the multiplicity of communications channels and media, and the increasing saliency of cultural and linguistic diversity" (New London Group, 1996: 63). This focus on multi-literacies was possibly also a response to the dawn of the internet age. The New London Group was part of the changing face of literacy pedagogy at that time: "Our main concern was the question of

life chances as it relates to the broader moral and cultural order of literacy pedagogies" (62). They were therefore looking at two things; the variety of information and the different forms in which it was delivered; and the social (in)equalities created by these texts. They proposed a "programmatic manifesto" (63), in which they suggested four components of pedagogy: 1) situated practice; 2) overt instruction; 3) critical framing; 4) transformed practice (65). The first component refers to developing the literacy skills of the reader; and the second is about the teacher's input to scaffolding the learning of the student and the teaching itself. Critical framing, the third component, means asking questions of the text and placing it in a socio-cultural context. Finally, transformed practice is what Janks (2014) described as the redesign process. The New London Group also discuss designs for social futures, arguing that: "to achieve this, we need to engage in a critical dialogue with the core concepts of fast capitalism, of emerging pluralistic forms of citizenship, and of different lifeworlds" (New London Group, 1996: 73). They state that we need to respond to the changing face of the world, because as Wallace (2003) points out:

- There is a need, in educational settings, to address social and political issues through text study;
- Reading is a public and social act as much as it is individual and private;
- Texts and our readings of those texts relate to the wider society; they do not just reflect but are constitutive of contemporary social life (5).

In response to these statements, it is necessary that the teaching of reading embodies critical literacy.

Why critical literacy?

As has been noted in previous sections, critical literacy is important because it empowers learners in what has become an increasingly complex society. As a population, we are constantly being bombarded with information, which is presented to us in a variety of forms. We need to provide our learners with strategies to enable them to navigate these texts in such a way that they can start to make better sense of the world around them:

> One of the key reasons why critical literacy should occupy a central position in literacy education is the overwhelming nature and amount of text in today's world. Without the ability to negotiate and critically examine multiple forms of text, a "proficient" reader might only be proficient enough to superficially understand these texts (Stevens & Bean, 2006:16).

One perspective on critical literacy is that it is about issues of power, domination and access and the central idea is that texts are never neutral (Janks, 2010).

> Texts are never neutral: they hail us by inviting us to take up the positions they offer. We often do so without recognizing their power to shape our identities. (Janks, 2019: 561)

We become critically literate through: asking questions of the text; considering the text from multiple perspectives; contemplating the author's intentions/bias; identifying gaps and silences in the text; and engaging in reflection. This is by no means an exhaustive list but serves to demonstrate some of the approaches that can be taken in the critical classroom. Shor (2009) emphasizes the reflective and reflexive nature of critical literacy, suggesting that it "is language use that questions the social construction of the self. When we are critically literate, we examine our ongoing development, to reveal the subjective positions from which we make sense of the world and act in it." (282) McLaughlin & DeVoogd (2004) provide four reasons why we need critical literacy in today's society:

> It helps us:
>
> 1) To establish equal status in the reader-author relationship;
> 2) To understand the motivation the author had for writing the text (the function) and how the author uses the text to make us understand in a particular way (the form);
> 3) To understand that the author's perspective is not the only perspective;
> 4) To become active users of the information in texts to develop independent perspectives, as opposed to being passive reproducers of the ideas in texts (7).

To achieve the above, we have to learn to read with and against the text. In explaining the latter, Janks (2019) wrote that it means: "I have to take up a

different point of view, different discourses, and different interests and focus on different visual representations and different evidence" (563). In order to assist students in developing a critical literacy approach to texts, the teacher must first be able to relate critical literacy to their own practice. This is demonstrated in a study on Continuing Professional Development for teachers by Sangster, Stone and Anderson (2013) that looked at the topic of critical literacy and critical pedagogies. With continued support from University lecturers, a group of teachers was able to develop their own critical literacy projects for their own teaching contexts. Similarly, Riley (2015) conducted research on how a small group of teachers from different schools worked together to promote critical literacy practices in each of their English classrooms. Through focusing on the experience of one particular teacher, Riley came to the following conclusion: "teachers' own critical literacy is part of critical literacy education…critical literacy practices should be considered in relation to school context, teacher identity and professional position" (423). Thus, reflexivity was an important component of my research, as I was required to examine my own situation and how this influenced my own critical literacy practices. This aspect will be discussed further at a later point.

Critical Media Literacy

> It is important that literacy instruction supports learners' ability to read myriad texts, in addition to how to read the world they live in as text. In a media-saturated society, where youths are educated daily by and through the media they engage with, critical media literacy becomes a significant and impactful way to create critical consumers and critical producers and promote critical thinking. (McArthur, 2019: 686)

Students need to be aware of being critical consumers and producers. Countering fake news is part of critical media literacy, and a most basic definition of fake news is that: "[it] is fabricated accounts without any basis in fact" (Comber & Grant, 2018: 329). The Commission on Fake News and the Teaching of Critical Literacy Skills by the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) in the UK, published their final report in 2018, which emphasized the need for embedding critical literacy skills in the curriculum for assisting children and

young people with identifying fake news. This was highlighted as an area of great concern because 59% of primary-aged children and 62.1% of secondary-aged students surveyed said that they had less trust in the news as a result of being aware of fake news (National Literacy Trust, 2018). This has the potential to undermine the democratic process, and teachers expressed concern that it is causing anxiety and worry in young people. The report concluded with a series of rights that young people should be entitled to. These formed The Children's Charter on Fake News, which comprised the following statements:

1) We should have the critical literacy skills we need to navigate the digital world and question the information that we find online;
2) We should have the right to access accurate news from trustworthy media companies. We should not have to read or hear news stories that will scare us or cause us anxiety without having opportunities to discuss them and put them into context;
3) We should be given opportunities to practice our critical literacy skills by looking at news stories we find on TV, on the radio and online, including websites, apps and social media;
4) We should understand how the news is made to help us become critical thinkers and spot fake news;
5) We should be encouraged and supported to talk about the news that we read online at home and with our friends.

However, successful delivery of the above has its challenges: Comber & Grant (2018) found that in teaching the topic of fake news to their students (showing humorous cartoons of world leaders and analyzing the examples and deconstructing them), they had "to be aware that some students are very reticent and suspicious because in their homelands they did not have a chance to have their voices heard" (331). This was something I also had to be cognizant of with my own students.

Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy is an over-arching term referring to the teaching approach adopted by teachers who want to implement a critical literacy approach in their classrooms. Critical pedagogy asks how and why knowledge is constructed the way it is, and how and why some constructions of reality are legitimated and celebrated by the dominant culture while others clearly are not. Critical pedagogy asks how our everyday common sense understandings – our social constructions or "subjectivities" – are produced and lived out. In other words, what are the social functions of knowledge? (McLaren 2009: 63). McLaren takes a very reflective view of critical pedagogy in that the reader seems to be expected to take responsibility for the examination of his/her own personal formations of knowledge. McLaren is clearly alluding to the gaps and silences that are present in one's construction of reality, drawing close parallels to one of the main concerns of critical literacy. Gilani-Williams (2014) highlights the transformative potential of critical pedagogy, saying that it:

> is concerned with questioning authority. It is in a way subversive…Emancipating the oppressed by challenging the beliefs and systems that dominate them is the concern of critical pedagogy. It seeks to empower the student to be critical about whatever he or she encounters (18).

To align my research with this definition of critical pedagogy would have been dangerous - for both for me and for the students - given the nature of the country in which I work. I prefer the definition of Burbules and Berk (1999) as I feel it is less confrontational. They suggest that critical pedagogy:

> is an effort to work within educational institutions and other media to raise questions about inequalities of power, about the false myths of opportunity and merit for many students, and about the way belief systems become internalized to the point where individuals and groups abandon the very aspiration to question or change their lot in life (50).

In order to contextualize this statement, I would like to refer back to the discussion of the current situation in Bahrain provided in the introduction. Because of the pockets of unrest that are still an issue today, it is difficult to argue that the process of hegemony is at work successfully across the country, the way it is in the West: "Hegemony refers to the maintenance of domination

not by the sheer exercise of force but primarily through consensual social practices, social forms and social structures produced in specific sites such as the church, the state, the school, the mass media, the political system, and the family" (McLaren 2009: 67). There is clearly not a hegenomic situation in Bahrain. Hegemony applies more to Western democratic countries. It may be fair to say that after the events of 2011, the ruling regime maintain their control through fear. There is still a clear police presence today, with police tanks maintaining positions across the island.

There appears to be a clash of ideologies in that the language of instruction at the higher educational institution where the research is being carried out is English. There could be a number of reasons for this, the most positive being that students are being prepared for work in a globalized working environment, where English is the lingua franca, thus increasing their employability prospects. However, it could be that students are being distanced from both their immediate culture and their inherited identities which could result in disempowerment – the majority of students have spent their entire educational careers being taught in the medium of Arabic. It is only the students from wealthier backgrounds - who have attended private bilingual schools - who have been exposed to extensive English language teaching, most often delivered by Western practitioners. This puts them at a distinct advantage over their government school educated counterparts in the context of the site of the research, as here the language of instruction is English.

In an interview with Global Education Magazine, Henry Giroux (n.d.) emphasizes the political nature of critical pedagogy, asserting the relationship between knowledge, power and authority.

> Finally, what has to be acknowledged is that critical pedagogy is not about an *a priori* method that simply can be applied regardless of context. It is the outcome of particular struggles and is always related to the specificity of particular contexts, students, communities, available

resources, the histories that students bring with them to the classroom, and the diverse experiences and identities they inhabit.[17]

ESL Curriculum for ESL Teachers in Training

In establishing the rationale for, and the uniqueness of my research, I examined the English as a Second Language (ESL) curriculum for teachers in training, to determine whether or not critical literacy was included. I started with looking at the Diploma in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (DELTA), because although most practitioners need at least a Masters-level degree to teach in higher education, it is possible to do so with a DELTA in some cases. DELTA is a Cambridge run programme and consists of three modules, all of which must be completed. Their focus is as follows:

Module 1: Understanding Language, Methodology and Resources for Teaching

Module 2: Developing Professional Practice

Module 3: Option 1: Extending Practice and ELT Specialism

Option 2: English Language Teaching Management[18]

As a result of an in-depth analysis of the DELTA syllabus that is published online, it was found that there is no mention of critical literacy featuring in their teacher education course. The closest hint of it is in a learning outcome for one content section in module 1. It notes that 'successful candidates can analyse the relationship between language and society.' They will look at 'how language is used to form, maintain and transform identity (e.g. cultural, social, political or religious) and power relations (DELTA, n.d.:3[19])' From the description, this could comprise a module in itself, in order to do the learning outcome justice.

[17] http://www.globaleducationmagazine.com/critical-interview-henry-giroux/
[18] https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/teaching-english/teaching-qualifications/delta/about-the-delta-modules/
[19] https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/Images/22096-delta-syllabus.pdf

There is no further mention of the tenets of critical literacy – the emphasis is on theoretical learning, lesson preparation, and teaching and reflection on the candidate's own practices.

Masters Qualification in TESOL

Universities around the world offer Masters programmes in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). The content and requirements of these courses obviously differ from institution to institution and from country to country. I used the Google search engine to identify two universities in America, Australia and the UK that taught Masters courses in TESOL. My aim was to establish the extent to which (if any), critical literacy featured in any given programme. As stated in my introduction, it was not until I undertook study at this level that I became aware of what critical literacy was, so I wanted to find out if other courses were providing similar teachings to their students. I found that overall, if courses were offered on critical literacy, they were usually as optional/elective courses rather than core courses, with one exception.

Australia has usually been at the forefront of critical literacy teaching and this was expected to be evident from the courses available for study at their institutions. Upon close examination of the MEd TESOL at the University of Sydney, there was one course (that students could elect to take or not) that could be informed by critical literacy for the 2018/19 academic year. This course was Language, Society and Power: "This course introduces students to key issues in sociolinguistics and language sociology such as the political economy of language, language variation and change, and critical discourse analysis."[20] The University of Melbourne had a compulsory TESOL course entitled: *Local Literacies in Global Contexts:*

> This subject will introduce students to the ways in which literacy supports and empowers learning and social change in global contexts, and will

[20] https://sydney.edu.au/courses/units-of-study/2019/lngs/lngs7002.html

explore the impact of literacy practices on learning in real world and virtual communities.[21]

The University of Glasgow had an optional course named Developing Literacy. This has the potential of explaining critical literacy but I would need to see a detailed course outline to confirm whether or not this was in fact the case, and this was not available online.

Reading in the English as a Second Language (ESL) Curriculum

Reading in the ESL curriculum tends to focus on basic comprehension of short reading passages. The APTIS test requires students to order a sequence of different sentences to make a coherent story and then to match the correct sub-headings from a selection to each paragraph in a text. The reading component of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) examination requires students to answer comprehension questions to check understanding of the given text. These include gap-fill questions, true/false questions and multiple choice. The theory of 'washback,' which refers to testing dictating what is taught in the classroom (Alderson & Wall, 1993), would strongly suggest that language teachers, when teaching reading, focus only on basic comprehension. For example, The British Council offer IELTS preparation courses to prospective test takers. This demonstrates how test focused students can be.

Although there are others tests across the English-speaking world, IELTS, is predominantly used by higher educational institutes as a measurement of students' English language ability, in terms of their readiness to study at degree level when instruction is in English. To provide a context, for a UK tier 4 visa, which is the visa required for international students to enrol in full-time study in the UK, a language level equal to CEFR B2 is required. This is equal to approximately a 6.0-6.5 IELTS. No critical literacy is required and therefore it is often not taught.

In the institution under study in Bahrain, students need an IELTS score of 5.0 or equivalent in order to enrol on degree-level courses, or they are required to

[21] https://handbook.unimelb.edu.au/2017/subjects/educ90930

achieve an overall CEFR B2 level on the APTIS test. However, they continue learning English as part of their content courses through each year of their course and graduate with an estimated IELTS level of approximately 6.5.

Critical Literacy in EFL Contexts

The most recent literature on critical literacy covers it being taught in higher educational institutes in ESL contexts, specifically across Asia. This section will detail some of the more significant studies, in order to establish approaches to teaching critical literacy - studies were cited from other higher education Institutions where critical literacy was being introduced in second language settings. The key findings of the studies will also be discussed. It is important to emphasize here that although my students are second language speakers of English, I was not teaching critical literacy as part of a language course. Despite this, this section will consider this body of literature as it did inform some teaching decisions and helped prepare me for potential difficulties that could arise. Huh (2016) found that balancing conventional and critical literacy was a successful approach in a South Korean university's study. Huh used four instructional steps in integrating critical literacy practices with skill-based instruction of reading. These were brainstorming, decoding, comprehension and critical literacy. It was found that when students were unable to understand the text, they could not move to the final step of critical literacy. When they were able to, they needed a lot of explicit guidance, and I expected this to be the case with my own students.

Kim and Pollard's (2017) case study, which reported on how they introduced critical pedagogy in their language classroom in a university in South Korea, found that both the students and the teacher researcher found the project to be stressful. Their reasons for this included: the shift from a teacher-centred to a student-centred paradigm; the shift of the teacher's role from directive to facilitative and the more frequent use of group work. I did not expect to face these problems to the same degree, since my institution already championed a

Problem Based Learning Approach. This meant that students were largely familiar with the teacher being more of a facilitator and were used to often working in groups. Kim and Pollard's research also suggested that group work and reflective writing should be an aspect of the curriculum and assessment. This was considered during the design process of my course syllabus.

Sharma and Phyak (2017) conducted a study on developing English teachers for critical pedagogy in Nepal. This was of interest to me because it provided insights into the types of material I could incorporate into my course. They focused on integrating critical sociopolitical issues into EFL teacher professional development, as Nepal has economical, ethnical/caste, gender and class inequalities. Sharma and Phyak (2017) worked on developing materials around the three themes of child labour, gender disparity in education and girls' trafficking. This made me contemplate to what extent critical agendas had to be local. It was not possible for me to look at a wide range of local sociopolitical issues because of the context in which I was teaching. They emphasized the importance of dialogues in problematising the social issues. This highlighted the significance of class discussions and thereby creating a safe space for students to express their thoughts and opinions. The authors also delivered a warning regarding what issues to select for teaching about social injustices: "One teacher said that while teaching about the discriminatory caste system, teachers should be aware of a possible danger of hatred among students from different ethnic groups" (222).

Yulianto's (2015) case study in EFL reading also focused on training teachers to use critical pedagogy principles. It took place in Indonesia, which made it of particular interest to me because the country is predominantly Muslim, and was therefore a similar context to my own study. The case study identified four major categories of activity that enabled students to read critically: offering problematic topics and reading materials that were related to the students personal and academic lives; encouraging the students to read between the

lines; distributing classroom power; and creating space for students' voices to be heard. The first category came up again and again in the literature, and I was acutely aware that this was going to be an area of contention for me. Yulianto (2015) highlighted three challenges with using critical pedagogy principles, the first being the lack of classroom-friendly authentic controversial reading materials. A passive culture and the unpredictability of classroom life were also cited as challenges.

In Iran, two studies have taken place in recent years that investigated critical literacy and critical pedagogy. Abednia and Izadinia (2013) explored the introduction of critical literacy to a reading comprehension course for English literature students at a university in Tehran. Consonant with Yulianto (2015) who reported that there was a passive culture among students, Abednia and Izadinia (2013) found that "the fundamentalist religious and political atmosphere of Iran plays a significant role in the cultivation of the culture of silence and neutrality" (340). They talked about the repercussions faced by those protesting the 2009 presidential election as a result of the alleged vote rigging. These involved imprisonment and expulsion from universities. This was similar to what happened in Bahrain following the Arab Spring in 2011. Abednia and Izadinia (2013) state that:

> These reactions have instilled in too many Iranians a fear which hinders their critical thinking abilities and enforces unthinking conformity. In academic ELT programmes, this fear has manifested itself in the avoidance of critical and politically unsafe topics and discussions in classes (340).

Students were assessed on the submission of five reflections written throughout the course, and from these five themes emerged, demonstrating the students critical engagement with the topics. These themes were: contextualizing issues; problem posing; defining and redefining key concepts; drawing on one's own and others' experience; and offering solutions and suggestions. To me, this reflects only the very beginning stages of the students' critical literacy journeys. Abednia and Izadinia (2013) recognized this themselves, asserting that only slight changes in student attitudes and learning approaches should be expected

in the duration of one course. I had to be similarly realistic. They also found that conflicts between old schooling habits and routines of critical pedagogy lead to student confusion. There was a further conflict between the values of critical literacy and the instrumentalist agenda of many educational institutions. In their study, Rashidi and Mozaffari (2012) found a number of factors contributed to a lack of critical pedagogy in Iranian higher education. These included: the Eastern culture of being a collectivist society; not criticizing or challenging dominant beliefs and traditions; and the restrictive nature of the education system.

Curriculum Development

Since I was devising my own course, which would be centrally informed by critical literacy theories, it was crucial that my design decisions were informed by the literature on curriculum development. It should also be noted here that I tailored critical literacy to the constraints and affordances of my particular context. This is an ethical issue that will be detailed later in the thesis.

> Curriculum Development focuses on determining what knowledge, skills, and values students learn in schools, what experiences should be provided to bring about intended learning outcomes, and how teaching and learning in schools or educational systems can be planned, measured and evaluated (Richards, 2001:2).

In order to identify the "knowledge, skills and values" that were necessary for students in my educational context, a needs analysis first had to be conducted. This helped me to address what the students' learning requirements were for the future, and helped inform the aims of my course: "needs analysis involves looking at what the learners know now, what they need to know by the end of the course, and what they want to know" (Macalister & Nation, 2010). However, in addition to this, the requirements of the institution also had to be met. For example, a certain number of contact hours for the course were stipulated. Richards (2001) also points out that a situation analysis should be carried out. This takes into account the current learning environment, the demands of the particular institution, and the wider socio-cultural factors that could impact on

the success of the course. Macalister and Nation (2010) refer to this as environmental analysis:

> All curriculum designs endeavour to address four curriculum components: why do we initiate instructions or aims? What should we teach to realise our set aims and objectives (content or subject matter)? How can we communicate target learning experiences (pedagogy, instruction)? What have we realised and what actions should we take accordingly in relation to the instructional program, learners and teachers (evaluation)? (Shawer, 2011[22]).

These components are important but the first thing I had to consider when creating my own course was that initially I had to submit an outline of the intended course and the learning outcomes. As a result of this institutional policy, it was therefore necessary for me to present the course as an outcomes-based curriculum. As outlined by Prideaux (2003) this "starts with desired outcomes, then content, teaching and learning, assessment and evaluation follow, in the stated order" (269).

As a next step, I had to consider the key elements that impact on both teaching and learning. Hounsell & Hounsell (2007) outline central concerns of teaching and learning in higher education, and I wanted to ensure that I took account of these during the development of my course. They discuss four dimensions of congruence: teaching-learning activities; assessment and the provision of feedback to students; students' backgrounds and aspirations; and course organization and management. "The term 'congruence' has been adopted as a means of capturing the interrelationships between high-quality learning outcomes and the strategies deployed to pursue these outcomes" (95). These interrelationships are crucial for meaningful learning to take place. They also highlight the importance of learning outcomes being aligned with teaching and assessment. This was assured in part in my case as a result of a rigorous pre-moderation process, as well as consultation with the institution's Curriculum

[22] https://www-oxfordbibliographies-com.ezproxy.is.ed.ac.uk/view/document/obo-9780199756810/obo-9780199756810-0009.xml#obo-9780199756810-0009-bibItem-0006

Development Advisor during the design process – this consultation was continuous to make sure that there was this alignment.

Course Syllabus Design

The selection of texts for the course was very important and careful consideration was given to this prior to teaching:

> Who we choose to provide voice to in our classes through text significantly impacts student engagement and learning. We must choose to be deliberate and intentional in the authors we read and give voice to in our classroom spaces so texts can be mirrors and windows, as well as pathways to endless possibilities. (McArthur, 2019: 688)

I incorporated international texts into the course because students becoming global citizens was something I wanted to promote: "In this era of global migration, war, and conflict, with their attendant pain and suffering, each one of us is challenged as to how we respond as individual and as global citizens" (Callow, 2017: 231).

Evaluation Theory

When outlining methods of data collection at a later point in this thesis, I state that evaluation takes place throughout the project. It was therefore necessary to explore evaluation theory so that an appropriate series of judgments could be made concerning the content of the curriculum, how the material is taught, and how the curriculum is received by the teachers on the course and students. Evaluations "typically describe and assess what was intended (goals and objectives), what happened that was unintended, what was actually implemented, and what outcomes and results were achieved" (Patton 2008:5). They are usually carried out in universities to enable comparisons across programmes or to inform funding decisions. In my research, it was important to incorporate evaluation into the research design because I was adopting a critical literacy approach within a new context, and it was therefore crucial to determine how effective this application had been. This is because:

> program evaluation is the systematic collection of information about the activities, characteristics, and results of programs to make judgments about the program, improve or further develop program effectiveness, inform decisions about future programming, and/or increase understanding. Utilization-focused program evaluation is evaluation done for and with specific intended primary users for specific, intended uses (Patton 2008: 39).

The intended primary users in this case were the subject teachers and the students, the intended use being to improve the course. Thus, it was a formative evaluation where the focus was on "improving and enhancing programs rather than rendering definitive judgment about effectiveness" (Patton 2008: 114). In designing an evaluation, there are usually certain standards that must be adhered to, although my institution does not have these in place. It is therefore necessary to explore some of the literature in this area. I identified the UK Evaluation Society Guidelines for Good Practice in Evaluation (published in 2003), but these grew out of the American educational standards that were developed in 1994. The United Nations Evaluation Group published Ethical Guidelines for Evaluation in 2008, but these were more applicable to the UN system/context.

The following standards were developed by the American Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation (AJCSEE) and these were what I adopted in my study:

1) Utility: seek to ensure that an evaluation will serve the information needs of intended users.

2) Feasibility: seek to ensure that an evaluation will be realistic, prudent, diplomatic, and frugal.

3) Propriety: seek to ensure that an evaluation will be conducted legally, ethically, and with due regard for the welfare of those involved in the evaluation, as well as those affected by its results.

4) Accuracy: seek to ensure that an evaluation will reveal and convey technically adequate information about the features that determine the worth or merit of the programme being evaluated[23].

The aim of the evaluation was to establish whether the course has been successful enough to warrant it becoming a permanent fixture on the Electives programme and possibly produce benefits for the wider constituency. This entailed gathering data on student enrolment rates and final student grades.

[23] http://www.unicef.org/evaluation/files/Evaluation_standards.pdf

Chapter 3

Methodology

This chapter first restates the research questions and then considers the question of different research paradigms before moving on to the research approach taken to the project including how it was influenced by evaluation theory. Validity and trustworthiness then become the focus, along with reflexivity as this is a central component of the project. The design frame is outlined to show how I gathered the data and in what order. A detailed account of the course itself follows, including the theoretical literature that informed the design of the course. I will then recount the data that were collected: for the interviews, questionnaires and reflective journal. The process of data analysis is thoroughly explained and then the ethical considerations are discussed at length since the specific issues I faced in my cultural context were central to the framing of this project. Finally generalizability is addressed.

Research Questions

As the literature review has established, a gap identified in the literature was that there had been no research that could be found on critical literacy in Bahrain or in the wider Gulf Cooperative Council (GCC) which consists of Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Yemen. There was one study conducted in the Iranian context that sought to identify the difficulties in applying critical literacy in the English language classroom (Rahimi & Bigdeli, 2015). It therefore appeared appropriate to construct a research and development study that sought to begin to fill this gap. The research aims for the current study were multiple: to develop a course that uses a critical literacy instructional approach; to instil and develop a critical perspective in students; to determine both teacher and student responses to the course; to have students evaluate the course; and to reflect continuously on the course design, in order to propose improvements to the course for its future implementation. These research aims informed the following research questions:

1) How can one foster critical literacy in students where there are distinct constraints on the freedom of expression and action?
2) To what extent do student and teacher perceptions of critical literacy change throughout the taught course?
3) In what ways, and to what degree, was the course successful in teaching analytical and critical reading?

The Research Paradigms

Qualitative research and quantitative research were once seen as two very separate and distinct approaches to research. Quantitative researchers have been characterized as adopting a positivist philosophy; and it is commonly understood that in quantitative research: "educational researchers should eliminate their biases, remain emotionally detached and uninvolved with the objects of study, and test or empirically justify their stated hypotheses" (Johnson & Onwugebuzie, 2004:14). Qualitative researchers take a more interpretivist stance, often beginning with a single case, and generating hypotheses from the analysis, where the data can then be analysed (Silverman, 2011). A contrary view has been argued by Crowe & Sheppard (2010) who focus on the similarities between qualitative and quantitative approaches, viewing them as forming more of a continuum with one another. They focus on the four key areas of differences and then work to discount them. First, they describe research methodology. They summarise the differences between the two approaches as idealism versus realism, interpretation versus causality, and description versus hypotheses. They show that the definitions for idealism and realism both lack completeness. Interpretation of the data is required for both research approaches and quantitative researchers no longer look for causality; instead they deal with probabilities and correlations. The existence of grounded theory debunks the idea that no theories can be developed from qualitative data and that qualitative data only describes the situation as it is. Crowe & Sheppard (2011) contest that quantitative researchers generate a theory and then develop a hypothesis to be tested. They point out that if one is to use a survey, the aim is to find information rather than test a hypothesis. Secondly, they

discuss context, values and involvement. They argue that no research is context free, that all research is influenced by cultural and societal values, and that all researchers are involved in their own research at some point. Thirdly, they discuss data, analysis and participants. Whether the researcher uses a qualitative or quantitative approach will depend on how much precision is required from the data that will dictate whether a numerical analysis is required or the use of words/thematic analysis. They argue that it is possible for both approaches to have only one participant, or many. Finally, they discuss a common error. This is that each camp thinks that the other has only one stereotypical design, when in fact this is not the case and each side has multiple designs available to them. For example, the qualitative paradigm has grounded theory, ethnography and narrative, while the quantitative paradigm has experimental, descriptive, and synthesis approaches. Although I would describe my research as qualitative, my survey questionnaires used both qualitative and quantitative questioning techniques, which shows how difficult it is to treat these two research approaches as completely separate entities.

The Research Approach

This was an action research project. What makes action research unique as a methodology is that the researcher is also the practitioner. They have direct involvement in their research, and its purpose is to instigate a change. This is summed up clearly by McNiff (2017) who summarises the ontological values of action research.

> It aims to understand what I/we are doing, and not only what 'they' are doing. This demonstrates a shared commitment towards 'we-I' forms of enquiry.
>
> It assumes that the researcher is in relation with everything else in the research field, and influences, and is influenced by, everything else. The research field cannot be studied in a value-free way, because the researcher is part of the situation they are studying and brings their own values with them (42).

I could have chosen a case study and have completely removed myself as a participant in the research and been an observer. However, I felt this was not

the best approach for a number of reasons. What I was proposing was a new framework for teaching critical reading in this region, and to have asked a colleague to then teach the course that I had designed while I stood on the outside and observed would not have resulted in as rich a source of data. I believed that the data sources would be much richer if I could also reflect on my own experiences as a practitioner. Being able to share my teaching experiences with the other course tutor could also have helped her feel more comfortable sharing her own reflections with me during our weekly course meetings. Also, given the ethical considerations involved in designing and teaching the course, with regard to political and religious contexts, there could be some apprehension felt by the other course tutor in delivering some of the material. By positioning myself as a practitioner on the course, I hoped to alleviate some of this potential apprehension.

My on-going design of the course and my teaching approaches were also informed by on-going 'feedback' on how the students were perceiving and engaging with the course. The literature on action research presents four stages of action research, and this continual process of plan, act, observe, reflect (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988) is based on Lewin's (1946: in McNiff, 2016) original design. I used this model throughout the course as a whole and with each individual lesson. This allowed me to investigate and evaluate my own work and take action in order to make improvements to future lessons and the course for the potential future teaching of it (McNiff, 2017). Since action research is a continual process, it is about changing key things for the future delivery of the course, as well as recognizing key things that worked. Kemmis (2009) states that the aims of action research are to "change practices, people's understanding of their practices, and the conditions under which they practice"(464). However, I do not think it is solely about change, as noted in the previous sentence.

> Action research is about showing that claims to improved practice must be interrogated and justified, and is about praxis. Praxis is informed, committed action that gives rise to knowledge as well as successful action. It is informed because other people's views and feelings are taken

> into account. It is committed and intentional in terms of values that you have examined and interrogated, and are prepared to defend. (McNiff, 2016: 20)

In terms of establishing a philosophical stance and research paradigm, I was initially tempted towards a critical social theory paradigm but my aim was not necessarily to initiate social change because of the sensitive nature of the culture in which I was working:

> Those working within the critical paradigm seek not merely understanding but change, and research is part of a wider struggle for a just society free from oppression and inequality. Researchers must adopt a standpoint from which to critique current power structures (Richards 2003: 40).

Herein lies the difficulty with distancing my research from the complex political situation in Bahrain. The purpose of this research was to provide a stimulus for transformative action in education, not for achieving the emancipation of a suppressed population. Brookfield (2005) also states that a key area of critical theory is "to provide people with knowledge and understanding that is intended to free them from oppression. The point of theory is to generate knowledge that will change, not just interpret, the world" (25). This was not possible given the limitations placed on me: public critique of the current power structures is considered a threat to national peace and has been met with serious consequences. This is an important point to acknowledge as I was not operating within a democratic society, therefore I was much more limited in what I could achieve.

It is for these reasons that this project was an action research project and not critical action research. The latter is emancipatory, is about empowerment and social transformation. In discussing this, Boog (2003) noted that:

> emancipation was not only freeing oneself from domination but also transforming society and achieving a more equal distribution of power and control within society. Its purpose was to achieve freedom from the power exercised by the dominant groups and classes and to obtain the power to be free to exert influence and give direction to one's own life (427).

My project does not claim to have achieved this as attempting to do so would have been dangerous for everyone involved in the research. I think there are definitely tenets of critical action research within my project but to state it as a fully-fledged piece of critical action research would suggest a misunderstanding of the literature. I believe my work does have transformative potential in the future within the education system in which I work, but I do not think it has achieved that yet and I do not think it will contribute to readdressing power balances in the society. I think that my students were empowered as readers, but I do not think that this has improved or will improve their position in society.

Ethical Considerations

The careful framing of critical literacy was crucial to the teaching context. This was an ethical issue because of the socio-political situation in Bahrain, as has already been detailed. Key ethical issues are discussed here but these are also returned to at different points in the thesis.

Letters of informed consent were signed by each student and by Susan (pseudonym for the other tutor on the course). These letters told participants that their participation in the research would be anonymous. This is why students absolutely cannot be identified by their responses to the questionnaire. It will be noted that this became problematic during the data analysis stages as student responses from the post-course survey questionnaire could not be cross-referenced with their responses to the pre-course survey. I spent a long time debating whether or not the disadvantages of this outweighed the concern of student anonymity. I decided on this issue when I read in the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) report from 2011 that a number of students were expelled from higher educational institutes across the country after the 2011 troubles. Students were expelled from the institution that is the site of the research. The report states that "one student was investigated and later disciplined for writing "the transportation system [in Bahrain] sucks" on their Facebook wall; another student was investigated and disciplined for

writing "all I need is my freedom" on their Facebook wall" (BICI 2011: 360). These were regarded as direct criticisms of Bahrain and both students were expelled. This influenced my decision to ensure that I upheld my promise of anonymity by guaranteeing that under no circumstances could students be identified by their responses to the questionnaire, including by me. The alternative option that I considered was issuing each student with a unique number and then using that number for both sets of questionnaires. But as long as I was able to identify students, there was no definitive safeguard that would prevent an outsider from identifying students, and for me, this was an ethical problem.

Evaluation Theory

Evaluation took place continuously as the course was being delivered. As has already been mentioned, the standards against which the evaluation took place where from the AJCSEE and included utility, feasibility, propriety and accuracy. These were met largely through the evaluation mechanisms that the Institution already had in place. Evaluation of the individual assessments occurred through pre-moderation and post-moderation processes, carried out by colleagues in the department. I was constantly evaluating the course material and Susan's and my own teaching as the course progressed. A course review template was circulated by the Institution to all courses at the end of the semester. This ensures continuity across departments. It also covers all four of the above standards. The 'End of Semester Course Review' form included the course survey data from the student cohort, the course results, and the internal moderator's report. Comments from the teaching team were also provided.

Validity and Trustworthiness

> I believe that we should be concerned with validity because action research is moral and political work. Because our practice affects other people, we have a moral obligation that any change in our practice is good for the others. Action research is also political work because it has a normative, teleological component (Feldman 2007: 31).

This refers to the trustworthiness and truth of the research, but also moral obligation as will be discussed in a later section. In discussing truth, Williams (2002) suggests that:

> truthfulness implies a respect for the truth. This relates to both of the virtues that, I shall claim in the following chapters, are the two basic virtues of truth, which I shall call Accuracy and Sincerity: you do the best you can to acquire true beliefs, and what you say reveals what you believe. The authority of academics must be rooted in their truthfulness in both these respects: they take care and they do not lie (11).

Incorporating reflexivity into my research design helped to ensure truthfulness. Another factor that contributed to the truthfulness of the research was rigour. According to Merriam (1995), there are three main aspects of rigor: internal validity, reliability and external validity. Internal validity concerns itself with the notion of reality: "qualitative research assumes that reality is constructed, multi-dimensional, and ever-changing; there is no such thing as a single, immutable reality waiting to be observed and measured" (54). She suggests five strategies that can be used to strengthen the internal validity of the research: triangulation; member checks; peer/colleague examination; statement of the researcher's experiences, assumptions, biases; and submersion/engagement in the research situation. I did not use triangulation but I used the other four listed strategies. Susan read the interview transcripts and was able to comment on them after both interviews had taken place. All assessments were pre-moderated and post-moderated by other colleagues in the Department, according to the moderation policy of the Institution. The course was passed for delivery at Academic Board, the assessments were deemed fit for purpose by the Faculty Board, and the students assessment results were also analysed at Faculty Board, before being approved at Academic Board. My experiences, assumptions and biases were charted in my reflective journal and finally, given that it was an action research project, I was submersed in the research through my teaching on the course. Suggested strategies to enable the researcher to make generalizations include triangulation, peer examination and an audit trail. The generalizability of the findings refers to the external validity. Merriam (1995) lists the four strategies that relate to this: thick descriptions; multi-site

designs; model comparison and sampling. Aside from providing a thick description of the project, I don't think the other strategies lend themselves well to my research. Thick description was a term used by Geertz (1973) and it refers to giving a very detailed account of the research so that the reader themselves can decide if it is applicable to their own context.

In achieving validity in qualitative research, Miles & Huberman (1984) state that researcher reflexivity is key, in terms of critiquing one's own values, interpretive frameworks and research practice. How I did this will be detailed later in this chapter under the 'reflexivity' section.

Cho & Trent (2006) discuss transactional versus transformational validity. They define each as follows:

> We define transactional validity in qualitative research as an interactive process between the researcher, the researched, and the collected data that is aimed at achieving a relatively higher level of accuracy and consensus by means of revisiting facts, feelings, experiences, and values or beliefs collected and interpreted...On the other hand, we define transformational validity in qualitative research as a progressive, emancipatory process leading toward social change that is to be achieved by the research endeavour itself. (321-322)

In transactional validity, Cho & Trent (2006) also highlight the importance of member checking and triangulation as strategies to ensure trustworthiness. However, they say that transformational validity does not rely on such strategies or techniques. Cho & Trent (2006) argue that "it is the ameliorative aspects of the research that achieve (or do not achieve) its validity" (324). I think that transactional validity applies more to my research because the aim of the research was not leading to social change. Although it is important to state again that I did not triangulate my data. I used different methods to achieve different outcomes, therefore gaining a more rounded picture.

In summary, the practical steps I took for ensuring validity and trustworthiness in my research were: ensuring truth through the incorporation of reflexivity; checking internal validity by emailing Susan the interview transcripts for

member checking, in addition to my personal engagement with the research project as a result of it being action research; and checking external validity by providing an explicit and detailed account of the research process. In this section I have focused on a few writers who seemed pertinent to my purposes here and the nature of my project.

Reflexivity

Being reflexive is not the same as being reflective:

> Reflexivity is not just about the ability to think about our actions – that is called reflection – but an examination of the foundations of frameworks of thought themselves. The focus is on a second-order question concerning thinking itself and not-taking-things-for-granted (May & Perry 2017:3).

Reflexivity is about the researcher justifying their actions and they do this through analysis of their thoughts (MacFarlane, 2009). It is not a process that occurs only at the end of the research but something that should happen all the way through. Dedicating half of the allotted weekly meeting time with the other course tutor to reflecting back on the previous week's lessons helped me to ensure that this was achieved, as was my keeping a reflective journal. Reflexivity was also incorporated into the analysis of the data. "Reflexivity is a process that helps researchers to consider their position and influence during the study, and it also helps them to know how they have constructed and even sometimes imposed meanings on the research process" (Savin-Baden & Major 2013: 76). The research used what Willig (2001: in Savin-Bader & Major 2013) term 'epistemological reflexivity': "This involves exploring how the researcher's belief system has shaped research design as well as the interpretation of findings" (Ibid: 77). Epistemological and ideological reflexivity would seem to be particularly called for in a project informed by critical literacy, which has at its core the deconstruction and reconstruction of worldviews. In discussing reflexivity as both an intellectual and moral virtue, Macfarlane (2009) argues that although it may be seen as a set of skills to put into practice, the researcher has to be open to criticism in order to make future improvements.

A lack of reflexive practice is known as dogmatism:

> Reflexivity requires researchers to be keenly self-aware of becoming rooted in dogmatic habits or attitudes. To reject the possibility of changing one's mind in academic life is to take an uncritical stance to the generation of knowledge and to put personal pride before the search for truth (Macfarlane 127: 2009).

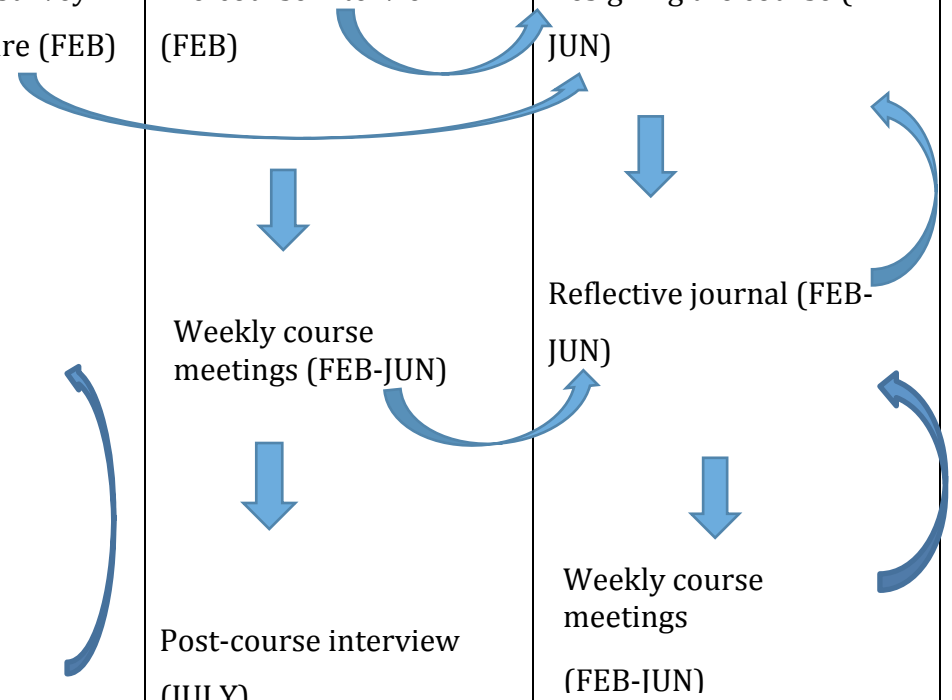
Working alongside another tutor who taught on the course created a dialogue in our weekly meetings regarding the course and its delivery.

Research Design

The research design was carefully thought out and table 3.1 provides a visual representation of this. Following this is a detailed account of the course itself and the texts that informed it.

Table 3.1: Schematic representation of the research design.

Student	Course tutor	Me (Practitioner and researcher)
Pre-course survey questionnaire (FEB) Completed Classwork (FEB-JUN) Summative assessments (MAR-JUN) Post-course survey questionnaire (JUN)	Pre-course interview (FEB) Weekly course meetings (FEB-JUN) Post-course interview (JULY)	Designing the course (FEB-JUN) Reflective journal (FEB-JUN) Weekly course meetings (FEB-JUN)



The Course

The course was 16 weeks in length (minus 1 week that was designated as an assessment week where all classes were cancelled), with 5 teaching hours per week. These were split into two 2-hour lessons and one 1-hour lesson each

week. This made a total of 70 contact hours, with a further 80 hours of self-directed study. Two classes ran in parallel to each other – one was taught by me and the other by Susan. (It was originally planned that three classes would run but only three students signed up for the third class and a class requires a minimum of 10 students to run. The low enrolment rate for the third class could have been due to timetabling clashes with other core subjects that students were required to take, or because of a lack of interest. There is no way to know.) The course aim was to develop critical literacy skills through analysis of a variety of texts. The course was achievement-based (meaning that students were awarded a grade on completion) and an aggregated mark of 60% was required to pass the course, in line with institutional policy.

The Context of the Course

The course ran as an Elective programme (along with other courses) under the Faculty of Humanities. Students at this Institution are required to achieve a total of 45 credits (out of 480) from the Electives programme before they are eligible to graduate. Most Electives ran at National Qualifications Framework (NQF) (National Authority for Qualifications & Quality & Quality Assurance of Education and Training, 2015) level 6 and were worth a total of 15 credits. This was the case for the course in question. The Electives cover a range of topics and aim to provide students with skills that complement their degrees but also gave them a more holistic view of the world.

There were challenges in writing the course as I had to be very aware of the context of the country in which the course was being taught. For example, I could not critique Bahrain or the power structure of the country. I could not incite transformation that may be interpreted as a threat to national stability. Therefore, cultural awareness and sensitivity were central concerns in the design of the course.

Recruiting Susan

Susan and I had worked together on the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses over the past three years. The institution had 2 semesters. In the first semester there was always a new intake of students and enrolment on the EAP level 1 and level 2 courses was high, but in the second semester it was lower as approximately half the intake had already passed level 2. This reduced the teaching load of some teachers in semester 2 and thus enabled them to teach Electives. Susan had already expressed an interest in the Electives programme through her teaching on a History course so I approached her to see if she would be interested in teaching on my reading course, knowing that she already had the space in her teaching schedule. Her background in teaching English was also of distinct value in the context of the research.

Theoretical Perspectives that Informed the Course Design

The literature played a key part in informing the course design. Critical literacy was a central tenet in this. The main areas from which I drew the literature that informed the course design are listed below, along with the specific writers I used.

- How other practitioners incorporated critical literacy in other geographical contexts in an EFL setting (Huang, 2011; Huh, 2016; Liu 2017; Kim & Pollard, 2017; Yulianto, 2015)
- Different texts used to instruct critical literacy (Turner, 2014; Stuckey & Kring, 2007; Senokossoff, 2013; Lee, 2015; Hodges, 2010; Esposito, 2011; Bourke, 2008; Janks, 2014)
- What informs a critical literacy framework (Janks, 2013; Huang, 2011; Serafini, 2012; Luke & Freebody, 1999)
- Visual literacies (Kellner & Share, 2007a; Janks 2014)
- Media literacy (Kellner & Share, 2004; Kellner & Share, 2007b)

Because the students had only had limited exposure to the analysis of different forms and genres of texts, the first half of the course focused primarily on

teaching analytical skills, although this also incorporated aspects of criticality. This decision to start with analytical reading before moving on to teach critical literacy was a key design decision informed by the results of the first survey questionnaire submitted by the students, as it was revealed that students had had very limited exposure to analysis in their past learning experiences. This decision appeared to work very well in the classroom. I was also particularly alert to teaching students the meta-language they needed to engage in discussion across the various topics.

Writing the Curriculum

The course had 5 learning objectives (LOs). These were that on successful completion of the course, students would be able to:

1) Analyse a variety of texts to raise cultural awareness
2) Analyse a variety of texts using an appropriate metalanguage
3) Interpret and apply meaning to visual signs and signifiers
4) Discuss the varying narrative stances across texts
5) Reflect on engagement with new reading strategies

The absence of the word 'critically' is notable. Choosing suitable vocabulary for each of the LOs was problematic because of the teaching context. The word critically, which could have started each of these learning objectives, can have negative connotations associated with making unfavourable judgments. I was also aware that it was likely that most of my students would have had very little previous exposure, if any, to analysis, and I was cautious of over-stating what *all* students would be capable of on completion of the course.

I was advised by the institution's management to consider reducing the number of learning objectives to three as they felt that five were too many, and that this would align the course with the other Elective courses which tended to have two to three learning objectives. However, I felt strongly that the learning

objectives accurately reflected what I believed students would have achieved by the end of the course.

Course Schedule

Table 3.2: Course schedule

Week	**Area of study**
1-2	Advertisements
3-4	Picturebooks
5	Assessment 1 Preparation
6	Novel to Film Adaptions
7	Fairytales Across Cultures
8	Assessment 2 Preparation
9-11	Lord of the Flies
12	Language and Identity
13	Fake News
14	Visual Literacies
15	Problem Based Learning (PBL) Research Project
16	Assessment week (no classes)

Texts Used and Learning Objectives

This section details the different texts used in each area of study and sets out the learning objectives – that is, what students would be able to do by the end of each teaching block.

Advertisements

Learning objectives:

1) To use key questions to analyse print advertisements
2) To create and present an advert analysis (on powerpoint)
3) To create a counter-advertisement.

The introductory topic to the course focused on analysing print advertisements. I chose to start with advertisements because they are texts with which we are all confronted at frequent intervals throughout our everyday lives: "advertisements are complex texts that work on many levels. As such, they can be the focal point for teaching elements of persuasive communication, various rhetorical devices, semiotic systems, and social values" (Esposito, 2011: 214). Esposito (2011) used a three-dimensional approach when teaching a group of Japanese university students how to analyse advertisements. Level one was linguistic analyses, level two was social analyses and level three was cultural analyses. I took a slightly more focused approach in my teaching. This was achieved through identifying the purpose(s) of the advert, the target audience, unpacking the design of the advert, and finally making sense of the overall advert. The classes conducted an analyses on two relatively straight-forward Heinz adverts. This was the teacher-led session which provided students with the framework and appropriate metalanguage for analyses. Students were then tasked in groups with conducting their own analyses through selecting a print advertisement (they could use the internet or bring in an advert from a magazine with which they were familiar). They then had to present their analysis to the rest of the class, who would then comment/ask questions.

The following week, the classes looked at the branding of Coca-Cola in terms of its global positioning in order then to produce counter-advertisements. Thus, students were required to read against the text. As discussed in the literature review, this means that they had to establish what the dominant ideology was of the text and then challenge this through examining what the text was not saying (what truths it might be hiding, or silencing). Students were asked to produce a counter-advertisement and write a short justification for their counter-advertisement.

Picturebooks

Learning objectives:

1) To analyse four picturebooks in small groups

2) To answer questions that probe critical awareness on each text through discussion

The four picturebooks that were used are detailed below.

The Arrival by Shaun Tan

Also known as a graphic novel, *The Arrival* tells the story of an immigrant leaving his family and travelling to a strange land. The text is long at 128 pages, the colour tones are black, browns and whites, like old photographs, and show images of abstract objects and foreign creatures as the man tries to make sense of his new surroundings.

The Red Tree by Shaun Tan

This picturebook is a series of rather dark images, all of which feature a young girl. It shows her complex feelings which are marred by hopelessness, but a tiny red leaf follows her through the images symbolizing hope, that ultimately triumphs in the form of a large red tree.

Voices in the Park by Anthony Browne

This picturebook tells the story of a mother and her son and a father and his daughter who take their dogs for a walk in the park. The children play together and the story is told from each of the character's perspectives.

The Chicken Thief by Beatrice Rodriguez

This is a wordless picturebook that tells the story of a chicken who is kidnapped from her friends by a fox. The friends then set out on a journey to rescue her, only to find that in the end, she has fallen in love with the fox.

The first lesson in this section looked at stereotypes and used the Technology, Entertainment and Design (TED) talk 'The Danger of a Single Story' by Chimamanda Adichie[24]. This led to a discussion on how we stereotype each other and how important it is to consider things from different perspectives, rather than our own dominant perspective. One class wrote a reflection on this TED talk (impromptu activity). I started with this lesson as I felt when moving on to look at the picturebooks, one of the key themes was challenging what may be the reader's dominant perspective and encouraging students to consider things from other points of view, and in fact, this was a central theme throughout the course. Lee (2015) used picturebooks with a group of 39 Tawainese university students in an EFL class and found their responses to be largely positive. Students were able to demonstrate multiple interpretations of the texts and felt that reading picturebooks improved their English proficiency. Senokossoff (2013) used picturebooks with middle school students to improve literacy instruction. She found that students benefited from engaging with visual literacies, and delayed readers (those who are reading below grade level) and English language learners were particularly helped by the use of picturebooks. Turner (2014) used a selection of postmodern picturebooks to develop critical literacy skills with Year 3 and Year 5 students. His study concluded that:

> this small research project has shown that the use of these multimodal texts not only enhances the students' ability to become literate, but it offers them the opportunity to be exposed to important social and ethical issues of our world and to be able to explore their personal beliefs in relation to these dilemmas (60).

I was unable to find any literature that discusses the use of picturebooks in higher education to enhance analytical skills. I took the decision to include picturebooks to continue to investigate visual literacies that we began to look at during the sessions on advertising. Also, I wanted to widen the students' definition of 'text.' Picturebooks are also accessible regardless of reading

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24 https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en

experience, but at the same time they are sophisticated constructs that can communicate complex social issues. Each text was chosen for a difference reason. *The Arrival* was chosen as it is more of an adult picturebook and I hoped that students would make links to the European refugee crisis. I selected *The Red Tree* for its themes of depression and hope and, like *The Arrival*, it also has complex illustrations for students to make sense of. *Voices in the Park* is about social status and how as adults we make judgments on people. *The Chicken Thief* looks at stock character stereotypes (i.e. the fox always being cast as a 'baddie') in children's literature and as the story does not end how most readers expect, our preconceptions of what constitutes an acceptable ending are challenged. Students were also encouraged to discuss the presence of the Stockholm syndrome (when the captive develops feelings for or falls in love with their captor).

When introduced to the picturebooks, students were given a series of 5-8 questions for each text to assist them in their analysis. This task was completed in small groups of 4-5 students. A sample of questions for *The Arrival* are listed below:

1) What do you think this story is about?
2) What do you think about the quality of the images?
3) How are the images supposed to make us feel?
4) What themes are dominant in the text?
5) If you knew that the author was half-Chinese, half-Australian, how would this affect your reading of the text?
6) To what extent is the silent narrative (no words) powerful enough to convey the messages of the text?
7) To what extent does the text have social relevance?

At the culmination of the topic, students were asked to write individually a short paragraph on the picturebook that interested them the most. Five guiding questions were provided as prompts.

Novel to Film

Learning objectives:

1) Read the first chapter of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* and watch the opening film equivalent.

2) Identify, and account for, how the film director's interpretation differs from the author's text.

This area of study looked at the word and the image, and asked students to consider the varying perspectives of the film director compared to the author. *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* was chosen for its historical perspective and issues of race and gender positioning in each text. As this was week 6 of the course, I started to introduce a critical literacy framework for looking at these texts, having discussions with the students about gaps and silences and aspects of power and how they compared across the texts. For gaps and silences these included questions about who was missing from each text (the novel and the movie) and the questions that the text did not raise. For power and interest we discussed who benefitted from the text and what knowledge the reader/viewer needed to bring to the text in order to understand it. Viewing the film also afforded us the opportunity to start considering the significance of visual signs and signifiers. As Stuckey & Kring (2007) point out: 'from a semiotic perspective, the analysis of signs and symbols can uncover hidden assumptions about race, gender and other cultural differences. (27)' Students were required to write a short essay saying whether they thought the film or the book provided them with more information about the story and why this was so. Another practitioner who has used film to teach critical literacy is Hodges (2010), although she used the films that she selected to illustrate the power of language in securing social victories among minority protagonists (e.g. in the National Spelling Bee or a College Debating Competition). Stuckey & Kring (2007) used *Brokeback Mountain* in their Graduate critical media literacy class to teach gender, issues of sexuality and cultural depictions.

Unfortunately when Susan came to teach this lesson the Activeboard in her classroom was not working and she was unable to relocate. This meant that she could not go through the powerpoint on T*he Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* with the students or show them the film segment, so she verbally talked through the aspects of the lesson that she could and then gave her students what had been designated as the alternative task, as the institution frequently had problems with very unreliable technology. The alternative task required them to go to the computer lab and work in small groups to analyse the opening chapter of a particular novel and compare it to its equivalent film version and write the same original short essay. The list of texts students were given to choose from were derived from a class discussion in a previous lesson and were voted on by the students. These texts were *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* by J.K. Rowling, *Twilight* by Stephenie Meyer, and *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis.

Fairytales Across Cultures

Learning objectives:

1) Read four different cultural versions of Cinderella.

2) Account for cultural variations between each fairytale.

Four texts were used: *Yen-Chen The Chinese Cinderella* (by Ai-Ling Louie), *The Persian Cinderella* (by Shirley Climo), *The Korean Cinderella* (Khu Hee Lee) and *The Egyptian Cinderella (*by Shirley Climo*)*. Each of these tales told the story of Cinderella from their unique cultural perspective. Students were asked to read each of these texts in small groups, and consider the impact of the different cultural perspectives on the narratives. It may seem strange that I decided to include fairytales because, as is clear from the literature, fairytales are most widely used with early years children (Wee, Kim & Lee, 2017: Bourke, 2008). However, I felt the texts were 'fit for purpose' and had the potential to stimulate rich discussion.

At this point, because we were almost half way through the course, students also submitted a reflection on the course so far. This included what was most interesting about the course to this point, what was the least interesting, what was the most challenging and what the student expected to learn in the second half of the course. This evaluation task enabled me to fine-tune the following parts of the course and was in line with the cyclical process of action research.

Lord of the Flies

Learning objectives:

1) Understand key actions, themes and motifs in the novel

2) Examine the relevance of the text to the present day

3) Identify gaps and silences

4) Consider alternate endings

It was difficult to find a culturally-appropriate novel. The text that is sometimes favoured for critical reading is *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee (Spires, 1999; Alford, 2001; Foss & Carpenter, 2002). However, the theme of social inequalities was too close to the social inequalities that exist between Sunni and Shia populations in Bahrain and also the rape accusation in the text proved problematic in terms of its sexual nature. *Lord of the Flies* explores the themes of good and evil and explores the similar theme of loss of innocence. A lot of time was spent going over the text to ensure that students had a basic understanding of the text. A debate also took place and the motion was: 'this house believes Piggy should have been the leader from the start of the boys' time on the island'. One lesson was set aside for students to create a re-telling of the story but because of the time that was required for the analysis of the text there was no time for this.

Language and Identity

Learning objectives:

1) Explore individual identity positions

2) Research issues of power between 'us' and 'them'

3) Critically analyse the poem *Mart was my Best Friend*

Some of the material for this section was adapted from the Janks (2014) text *Doing Critical Literacy* (section 2). As a result of this, this topic had a distinctly African framing. I did this as it was not possible to use my students' own context. This was a difficult decision, however, because a premise of critical literacy is that students should be able to relate it to their own lives. This topic looked at power and responsibility and the different identity positions an individual has. The poem *Mart was my Best Friend* by Michael Rosen was used to look at identity positions in conflict. The class answered a series of questions around the poem, about "identity and difference and the ways in which language is used to construct them. It works with categories of us and them, belonging and exclusion, as well as construction of the Other" (Janks, 2014: 34).

Fake News

Learning objectives:

1) Define fake news

2) Identify and evaluate fake news

3) Consider the implications of, and ethical factors associated with the use and dissemination of fake news.

4) Create a checklist to help school children distinguish real news from fake news.

It was hard not to be political with this topic. We looked at definitions of fake news before watching a TED talk on how fake news spreads. We then examined two of the most widely circulated pieces of fake news on the internet in 2016. Next, we looked at how to identify truth, through presenting students with two websites which deal with the same topic. One communicated true information

and the other was made up. The students had to distinguish which was which. Students were then tasked with imagining that they were explaining the concept of fake news to a group of primary school-aged children. They had to make a checklist to help the children distinguish real news from fake news. Upon completion, we compared these lists to the adverts published by Facebook in the UK press in May 2017 to help users spot fake news.

Visual Literacy: Freej

Learning objectives:

1) Identify visual concepts/media literacy

2) Watch *Jameela* and critically analyse according to gender issues

3) Watch *Global Village* and critically analyse according to culture

4) Anchor a visual image (photograph)

Freej is an Arabic 3D animation, with English subtitles, by Dubai-based creator Mohammed Saeed Harib. The series runs annually throughout every Ramadan. Each episode is approximately 15 minutes in length and centres around the lives of four old Emirati women who live in a traditional neighbourhood in modern day Dubai. I selected two episodes from the series (*Jameela* and *Global Village*). We began by looking at critical visual literacy and visual concepts (Janks, 2014). We watched *Jameela* first and our post-viewing discussion focused on gender and the interpretations of different audiences. In the next lesson we viewed the *Global Village* episode and our post-viewing discussion was about culture and geography, as set out below:

1) What is achieved by setting the episode at the global village?

2) Is the Western or Arabic audience the target here?

3) How do the Freej women describe the Global Village?

4) How are different cultures depicted? (eg. the French, the Kenyan etc)

5) What visual representations does the composer use for each?

6) How effectively does he use humour in each situation?

7) What are the implied dangers of crossing cultural boundaries in this episode?

8) What social issues is the composer calling into question?

Susan was absent for a part of this topic so I taught both classes. In addition to looking at *Freej*, we also looked at photographic choices, taken from Janks (2014) and how photographs are anchored, in terms of their positioning and how much of a particular image is shown.

Problem Based Learning (PBL) Project

Learning objective:

1) Present a solution to the (student's) chosen problem

This was a compulsory component dictated by the Institution which is championing a PBL approach. This was difficult to integrate into my course because I think a PBL approach works in subjects like Engineering and ICT but is not well suited to the Humanities. The PBL approach involves students working in small groups to resolve a set problem. The seven steps of the PBL cycle as set out by the institution are:

1) Setting the climate (establishing the problem)
2) Reaching a shared understanding of the problem
3) Brainstorming
4) Formulating learning issues
5) Independent study
6) Developing a response
7) Presenting the outcome

Students were presented with the following three 'problems' and asked to choose one of the following to work on:

1) Identify a social issue that concerns you. For example, in class we looked at the problem of car parking spaces for students at the Polytechnic. Create a brief action plan in response to this issue. For example, what steps can you take to move towards improving/resolving the issue?

2) Source one example of fake news (an article or video that you found on social media for example) and explain your opinions on that particular text. For example, is it dangerous? Why/why not?

3) If *Freej* were to relocate their animation from Dubai to Bahrain, what might the new version of the text look like? Outline some of the changes that you think might occur if the text was to be rewritten in this context. For example, what would the characters look like? What social issues might the characters be confronting?

Assessments

The course had 4 assessments that students had to complete at different stages throughout the 16 weeks.

Assessment 1: Students will select one of two essay questions:

1) Compare and contrast the form and content of printed advertisements for the same product (or a closely-related product), which are aimed primarily at women with those which are aimed primarily at men.

2) *"In the best picture books, the illustrations are absolutely necessary. They carry parts of the story or narrative and in some cases the language is dropped and the pictures alone are all that is needed."* (Gleeson, 2003)

Choose two picture books and compare and contrast them with regard to the above statement.

The focus of this assessment was primarily on analysis and interrogating perspectives, and this related to learning outcome 4.

Assessment 2: Students will select one of two essay questions:

1) Select one fairytale and examine two versions from different cultures. Discuss the cultural reasons for the variations and the impact that this has on the reader.

2) Works of literature are more and more frequently being made into blockbuster films. Choose a book with which you are familiar and compare the opening chapter with the equivalent film version. Discuss the different approaches required of the audience for each text and situate each in a cultural context.

The focus of this assessment was on the socio-political systems in which we live and the language used to communicate successfully (learning outcomes 1 and 2).

Assessment 3: create an advertisement re-representing the novel studied in the course, including at least three characters, objects or events that are of key significance. Students will be required to justify their choice of visual signs and signifiers in an accompanying short essay. This should also include critical analysis (eg. aspects of power and interest, gaps and silences, construction of characters etc.)

The focus of this assessment was on redesign and critical framing of the novel (learning outcome 3).

Assessment 4: write a reflection on the Problem-Based Learning Research Project. **The reflection should include <u>all</u> of the following:**

- Did the PBL project meet your expectations? Provide examples.
- What was the most important/useful/interesting/relevant aspect of the PBL project for you?
- What aspect of the PBL project did you find most challenging and why?
- Identify how these newly acquired reading skills are going to help you in the rest of your studies and in your chosen area of employment

The focus of this assessment was on opportunities for critique and social transformation (learning outcome 5).

Weightings

Separate rubrics were designed for each of these assessments and each one had a different weighting:

Assessment 1 (essay) was worth 25% of the overall grade

Assessment 2 (essay) was worth 35% of the overall grade

Assessment 3 (advertisement) was worth 20% of the overall grade

Assessment 4 (reflection) was worth 20% of the overall grade

These weightings were agreed with the Electives Programme Manager and decisions were based on the type of each assessment. I think equal weighting (25%) for each assessment would have been more appropriate, but the problem was that assessment 2 assesses two learning outcomes. Also, assessment 3 (advertisement) and assessment 4 (reflection) were deemed by the Programme Manager to be less demanding in terms of what they required students to produce, compared to lengthy essays.

Students were required to pass all four assessments, but there was a resit opportunity for each one. The maximum mark that could be awarded for a resubmission was 60%. Again, this was in line with the policy of the institution.

Grades

Percentage Score	Reported Grade
95 - 100%	A+
90 - 94%	A
85 - 89%	A-

80 - 84%	B+
75 - 79%	B
70 = 74%	B-
65 - 69%	C+
60 - 64%	C
<60%	F

Data Collection

Weekly Team Meetings

Purpose(s)

Weekly team meetings were held between Susan and me. These took place in a private meeting room at the end of each week and usually lasted for 40 minutes, although we had an hour set aside for these meetings. The purpose of them was twofold: to give Susan an opportunity to reflect on the week's teaching; and to enable us to discuss and review the teaching materials for the following week.

Content

As discussed above, the meeting was split into two parts, the first part being a reflection on the week's lessons and the second part looking at the following week's teaching materials. It should be noted here however, in terms of the reflection, that Susan and I shared an office and she taught her classes before mine. Thus, a lot of informal reflection actually took place across our desks, as I would always ask her how her class had gone when she returned to the office. These reflections were recorded in my reflective journal, and on occasion I would refer to something she had said in the office in our meeting, but for the most part it had been already covered. I think this is why our meetings were always shorter than the one hour allocated time slot. Also, in terms of being

briefed on the teaching materials for the following week, I always had this stored on the virtual learning platform in plenty of time, so again Susan would have already looked at this in the office and if she had any questions or queries she would often ask me there and then. Again, these were recorded in my reflective journal.

Interviews

Interviews and the Approach Adopted to Interviewing

Interviews are used for finding out about a person's experiences, feelings and thoughts in the lived world. Edwards & Holland (2013) detail the different types of interviews that can take place. These include: ethnographic; oral history; life course; life history; biographical; and narrative interviews. Each one serves a different purpose but I do not necessarily believe that an interview can always clearly be categorised under one type.

Kvale (2007) suggests a seven-stage route for interviewing, which is: thematizing; designing; interviewing; transcribing; analysing; verifying; and reporting. Rabionet (2011) suggests six stages that should be accounted for when designing and conducting semi-structured interviews. These are: selecting the kind of interview; establishing the ethical guidelines; crafting the interview protocol; conducting and recording the interview; analysing and summarising the interview; and reporting the findings. The first of her four stages will be discussed in this section (with the other stages being picked up at a later point), as her stages are more detailed than Kvale's stages.

Interviews can be classified into three types: structured, semi-structured and unstructured. Structured interviews are where one asks each interviewee exactly the same scripted questions. This is useful when one is interviewing a large group of people and needs to make comparisons across the sample. Unstructured interviews involve very little prepared structure and are usually used when the interviewer is using a life history approach (Brinkman, 2013). Semi-structured interviews are somewhere in the middle and it was this

approach I took to both the pre- and post-course interviews that took place with Susan.

> Compared to structured interviews, semi-structured interviews can make better use of the knowledge-producing potentials of dialogues by allowing much more leeway for following up on whatever angles are deemed important by the interviewee. Semi-structured interviews also give the interviewer a greater chance of becoming visible as a knowledge-producing participant in the process itself, rather than hiding behind a preset interview guide. (Brinkman 2013: 21)

In agreement with the ethos of action research and the tenets of critical literacy, this approach allowed Susan's voice and part in the project to become heard and visible. It placed her in a position of shared power. This co-constructed nature of interviews is explained by Josselson (2013):

> The reflection that all interviews are co-constructed implies that the material produced by the interviewee is influenced by the context of the interview and the responses of the interviewer, so that one cannot reify the interview material as "the" story; it is only "a" story produced for the occasion of the interview (8).

This means that the interviewer and the participant are equally reliant on each other during the interview process and work together to produce meaning. The semi-structured approach allowed me to prepare some questions ahead of time in order to ensure that the necessary themes were explored during the interviews. It also allowed me to remain alert to themes that were introduced during the interview by my colleague. Holstein and Gubrium (2004) discuss the active interview: "understanding *how* the meaning-making process unfolds in the interview is as critical as apprehending *what* is substantively asked and conveyed" (143). I think that the key role of the interviewer as well as the participant has to be considered here, as it is the presence of both these parties that makes the interview an interactive process, thus the active interview. The questions were also given to Susan a few days prior to each interview to give her time to contemplate her responses. This was productive as she came to the interview with some notes of points she wanted to discuss. Both of these interviews lasted for approximately an hour, were audio recorded and then transcribed.

Susan and I had already established a professional relationship over the past three years of working together on the EAP courses. In this respect, I was an 'insider' researcher as I had already been working at this institution for a number of years. Luker (2008) highlights that the problem here is that you can overlook things that to an outside observer might appear rather strange. However, I was still an 'outsider' with regard to the wider Arabic culture and language. Lucker (2008) suggests that "no matter how acculturated you become, there will still be those moments when you realize you were not born into this setting, and you'll always be a bit tone-deaf to its nuances" (156). Despite this disadvantage, from the 'insider' perspective I had an advantage because I felt that Susan already trusted me as the interviewer and colleague and was thus able to open up about her thoughts and experiences in a much more honest manner. Josselson (2013) does not allow her students to interview people they know, because she thinks that:

> the existence of this type of prior relationship so strongly colours what can be told that the contextual analysis of the interview is saturated with this dynamic. Preserving the outside real relationship will always be more salient than the interview relationship, for both researcher and participant (17).

I agree with her to an extent, which is one of the contributing factors to why I did not interview the students. (She goes on to talk about subtle coercion that can occur when teachers interview their own students.) In the case of Susan, however, I feel that the interview process actually benefitted from our prior relationship, which is evident from the data that were gathered.

Ethics and Informed Consent

> Informed consent entails informing the research subjects about the overall purpose of the investigation and the main features of the design, as well as of possible risks and benefits from participation in the research project. (Kvale, 2011: 6)

Informed consent was obtained from Susan prior to the study and she was briefed verbally and in writing on the project. It was agreed that she would remain anonymous. Permission was granted by the Institution's Research

Committee to conduct the interviews. In addition, ethical permission was also granted from Moray House School of Education at the University of Edinburgh.

Process of Interviews

The interviews took place in a private meeting room in the institution. An hour was set aside for each interview, although I made sure that there was the opportunity for the interviews to run longer if necessary. The pre-course interview actually took place after the first lesson of the course had run, as we were unable to schedule it in the preceding week as planned, because we had to attend compulsory internal professional development workshops. This was not problematic however as the opening lesson involved students completing the questionnaire and then a very general introduction to the course was provided. It did not impact on the interview data that were gathered. The interviews started out with me asking Susan prepared questions but then as she responded I would follow up or probe further her responses. At the end of the interview I made sure I had covered all the areas I had intended to by reviewing my list of prepared questions.

Pre-course interview

I began by asking Susan some questions that sought demographic information. Questions then centred around her perceptions of reading. She was asked to detail her own learning, from her childhood experiences of reading to more recent learning of reading in other languages. Attention then turned to her own teaching as an English language teacher and how she conceptualized reading in that context. I also asked her what it means to be literate and about her understanding of critical literacy. This enabled me to formulate a starting point regarding her perceptions of critical literacy which would eventually help me to address the second research question. I concluded this interview by asking Susan what expectations she had of the course and whether she had any concerns about it. There was also space for her to bring along her own agenda items.

Post-course interview

A more reflective and evaluative tone was adopted in this interview. The interview focused on her personal insights on how the course ran, her perceptions of critical literacy and her evaluation of the course design. Questions explored Susan's understanding of critical literacy, to enable me during the process of analysis to draw comparisons with her pre-course interview responses; and I then asked her to reflect generally on the course. This included what topics were most and least engaging to teach; what was most challenging to teach; and whether she felt that the aims of the course were met. We also explored how she made sense of the course in her own classroom and what impact this course might have on her future teaching across other courses.

Recording and Transcription

Both interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder and later transcribed by me. Kvale (2007) describes the process of transcribing and suggests that "transcripts are impoverished decontextualized renderings of interview conversations" (93). I understand his argument that transcriptions often miss out pauses and do not, for example, communicate tone of voice or nervous laughter; but I do not think these issues were relevant to my transcriptions, as I was not engaging in conversational analysis. In my case, transcribing the interviews based solely on the spoken word was fit for purpose. After each interview had been transcribed, the transcription was emailed to Susan for member checking.

Analysis

Both interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. The interview transcriptions were relatively short, so it was not necessary to code the transcript as themes were easily identifiable. Theoretical thematic analysis was adopted. This approach "tend[s] to be driven by the researcher's theoretical or analytic interest in the area, and is thus more explicitly analyst driven" (Braun &

Clarke, 2006: 84). The themes emerged after close analysis of the transcriptions. They were identified at a latent, or interpretive, level: "a thematic analysis at the latent level goes beyond the semantic content of the data, and starts to identify or examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations and ideologies that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 84). Braun & Clarke (2006) present six phases for conducting thematic analysis. The phases are as follows: familiarizing yourself with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the report. These are the phases that I followed in my own thematic analysis. Nowell et al (2017) also propose six phases but they point out that this is not a linear process but rather is iterative and requires the researcher to go back and forth between phases. Themes identified from the interview transcripts were: process of reading; motivations; student engagement and constraints.

Questionnaires

The central rationale for using survey questionnaires to gather data from the student cohort was that they allowed students to express their thoughts in a private and confidential manner. Two survey questionnaires were distributed to the students, one on the first day of the course and another on the final day of the course. Both included questions that allowed me to gather qualitative and quantitative data. This decision was taken because for some parts of the questionnaire, for example when I was asking about how students had learned to read, a structured response in the form of multiple-choice responses was necessary. These responses were measurable, using descriptive statistics to present the data. The questionnaire also allowed me to compare data, because I was asking them how they had learned to read in Arabic, and then later they were asked how they had learned to read in English. Other questions required a qualitative approach, in that they asked students for their personal insights or about their experiences, for example: 'does your reason for reading affect how much attention you give to the text? Please provide examples'. Such questions sought detailed information and allowed the students to express themselves

freely. Using both qualitative and quantitative question types was appropriate given the aims of my research and there were numerous benefits to taking this approach. Quantitative questions were often followed up with qualitative questions, for instance, a multiple choice question asking about which methods the student found most useful when learning to read in Arabic was followed by an open-ended question which asked why did this/these methods work for you?

Rea & Parker (2014) list the advantages of using questionnaires. The main two from their listing that correspond to my own context were convenience (of being able to allocate class time in a computer lab to the completion of the questionnaires) and the rapid nature of the data collection. Dornyei (2003) also cites efficiency in researcher time and effort as advantages. However, I disagree as a lot of time went into planning the questions and ensuring they were worded appropriately so that they would yield the required data. The questionnaires also had to be pretested and some of the questions reworked and then re-tested. In addition, although cited in the literature as advantages, these were not for me the main advantage for using questionnaires: this was the element of anonymity that they provided which was crucial to my research context.

Rea & Parker (2014) list three disadvantages of using questionnaires, but none of these was applicable to me. Their disadvantages were limited respondent bases (i.e. lack of responses), self-selection (i.e. those who decide to take the questionnaire) and lack of interviewer involvement (i.e. the researcher is not present when the questionnaire is being taken so there is no opportunity for dialogue to sort out any problems or misunderstandings). I avoided these pitfalls by setting aside class time for the questionnaire to be completed, having everyone in both classes agree to participate in the research, and by being physically present when both classes were completing the questionnaire in case there were any questions or things that needed clarified.

Questionnaires elicit three types of data: factual/descriptive, behavioural and attitudinal (Dornyei, 2003; Rea & Parker 2014) and my survey questionnaires

generated all three. I began by gathering demographic information from the students (factual/descriptive), then questioned them on their language learning strategies (behavioural), and their opinions and beliefs (attitudinal) (Dornyei, 2003).

Design of questionnaires, and what informed this

Interacting with the literature helped me to construct appropriate survey questions to enable me to gather the necessary data to answer my research questions. Considerations that were taken into account when designing the questionnaire included: conceptual variability and vague quantifiers; problematic wording; response options; order effects; and recall and retrieval difficulty and estimation difficulty (Giroux, 2017). The first element of this list involves taking care not to have double-barrel questions (Saris & Gallhofer, 2014), and to avoid complex or unclear syntax or hidden assumptions (Giroux, 2017). Problematic wording was a concern because as Giroux (2017) stated, words can have many meanings. A word can mean a different thing to different respondents. This was especially pertinent in my case where my respondents were not native English speakers. It also reinforced the importance of pre-testing the questionnaires.

The response options have to be mutually exclusive and exhaustive. I made sure when using the Likert scale for answers that they were well balanced and that my multiple-choice questions always had an 'other' option and an additional sub-question that then gave the student the opportunity to explain their 'other' answer. Also, open-ended questions had no word limit on responses. Structure is obviously important in terms of the students making sense of the content of the questionnaire, so I made sure to split the questionnaire into separate labelled sections. Finally, Giroux (2017) asks that we consider whether the respondent is in a position to even know the answer to the question. People are more likely to recall recent events or events that had a greater impact or salience.

Pre-course questionnaire

Table 3.3: Topic set for the pre-course questionnaire

Topic set for the pre-course questionnaire
Demographic information (4 multiple choice questions and 2 open-ended)
Learning to read in Arabic (5 multiple choice questions and 2 open-ended)
Current reading in Arabic (1 multiple choice question, 4 open-ended and 2 yes/no responses)
Experience of reading in English (3 multiple choice questions and 5 open-ended)
Critical reading (3 open-ended questions and 8 yes/no responses)
Types of reading (7 multiple choice questions and 2 open-ended)

The first section in this questionnaire centred around demographic information so that I could establish the backgrounds of the students. I then asked about the students' reading experiences in Arabic, in order to establish their L1 reading habits and how they learned to read. I moved on to ask about their reading habits in English, for example their purposes for reading. I wanted to determine how much exposure, if any, students had had to analytical reading as this would help inform the design of my course. I also asked students about the similarities and differences between reading in Arabic and English, and then how they learned to read in English. This helped me ascertain how students' past experiences had shaped their current reading habits and their responses influenced the construction and delivery of the course. Questions then turned to

what it means to read critically, so I could gauge what students understood reading critically to involve. The questionnaire used a variety of open-ended and close-ended questions. Closed questions with a 'yes/no' response also had an 'I'm not sure' option to ensure that I did not make assumptions about the students' understanding. There were a number of multiple-choice questions.

There were 37 questions. The total number of questions represented in the table above adds up to 48 questions because some questions had part (a), (b) and (c). The information from this questionnaire was used to assist me in constructing the course.

Post-course questionnaire

Table 3.4: Topic set for the post-course questionnaire

Topic set for the post-course questionnaire
Demographic information (2 multiple choice questions)
Purpose of the course (6 open-ended questions and 3 yes/no responses)
Topics studied (2 multiple choice questions, 6 open-ended questions and 2 likert scale)
Teaching methods (3 yes/no responses, 5 open-ended questions and 1 likert scale)

This questionnaire was more evaluative in its nature. It asked students about their understanding of analysis and critical reading having taken the course, and asked them about how engaging and how challenging they found the course and how they responded to the very different content and pedagogical approaches used. This questionnaire was relatively shorter and included a total of 16 questions. These questions took the form of both open and closed questions,

which were yes/no responses and Likert scales. The latter is what Saris & Gallhofer term 'batteries of requests' and this simplifies the answering process (Saris & Gallhofer, 2014). It is when the question is stated once (the request) and then the stimulus follows without repeating the same request again. For example, 'Please rate how difficult you found each topic of the course'. The nine sub-questions that followed each stated one topic area covered. As was the case with the pre-course questionnaire, yes/no responses were often followed by open questions, for example question 5 asked 'Do you think critical reading is important?' Students were then asked to 'please explain why or why not'.

This questionnaire focused on the third research question (in what ways, and to what degree, was the course successful in teaching analytical and critical reading?). It therefore involved such questions as 'what do we do when we analyse a text?' and 'do you know what critical reading is?...If yes, what do you think critical reading involves. If no, what are you unsure about [the meaning of] critical literacy?' It also asked 'do you think this course has empowered you as a reader?...If yes, please say how the course has empowered you as a reader. If no, how has the course made you feel as a reader?'

In both questionnaires, close attention was paid to the vocabulary used in each question as well as to the general composition of the questions, to ensure that they could be understood clearly by L2 speakers. Both questionnaires were also piloted by two colleagues who were English language instructors, and by my supervisors. In the pre-course survey questionnaire, some vocabulary items were changed as a result of this piloting, for example 'methods' was substituted for 'techniques'. Some questions were deleted, such as 'was it difficult for you to learn to read in English?' and others were added about the similarities and differences between reading in Arabic and English. In the post-course survey, sub-questions were made clearer and when asking students about what topics on the course they enjoyed studying, a list was added to remind them of what had been covered.

Administration of questionnaires

Both sets of questionnaires were constructed using The Bristol Online Survey and the web link and access code were distributed to students by email by their class tutor. They were completed electronically by students during the class. One of the three lessons per week took place in a computer lab, so students could access easily the questionnaire. All students enrolled on the course participated in the pre-course questionnaire (34 students in total); but by the end of the course, 4 students had withdrawn as a consequence of them missing more than 20% of the scheduled classes. It is the policy of the institution that if a student has an absence rate in excess of 20%, they are automatically withdrawn from the course and receive a Failing grade. All the remaining 30 students completed the post-course questionnaire.

Maintaining student confidentiality, as was promised in the letter of informed consent, was a central concern. As a result, I took the decision to have students fill out the questionnaires anonymously. This meant that no individual could be identified through their responses. This was a key ethical consideration, as should some of a student's responses to the questionnaires be construed as a critique of the country's education system, the consequences for that student would be severe. However, my decision to guarantee anonymity became problematic during the data analysis stage as I could not cross-reference individual student responses from the post-course questionnaire with those of the pre-course one. This was an absolutely necessary decision however, as ethical considerations had to take priority over what would have been optimal for the analysis of the questionnaire responses.

Analysis of data

Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the questionnaire data (these are presented in appendix 2). I analysed the qualitative data in the questionnaires using thematic analysis, in the same way I did with the interview data. Both sets of data were presented in an integrated way to reflect the shared power relations in the project between teacher and students – one set of data was not

more important than the other. I identified similar themes across both, in order to produce sub-categories, but also looked closely for any outlying responses and considered them accordingly in my findings.

Reflective Journal

Purpose(s) of Journal

I kept a reflective journal throughout the duration of the course. This enabled me to record my thoughts and feelings about each individual lesson. I focused on the strengths and weaknesses of each lesson, as well as student interaction. This contributed to me becoming a more reflective and reflexive teacher. Most of the literature on writing reflective journals revolves around students keeping reflective journals of their learning, and Lindroth (2015) described the benefits of using reflective journals with pre-service teachers. He found that reflective journals helped them link theory with practice and centre on the students and their learning. He suggests: "purposeful reflection reduces random decision-making and allows an individual to make choices by carefully examining information gathered from various experiences, resulting in purposeful thinking" (66). Although his research context was different to mine, in that I am not a pre-service teacher, his findings are still relevant to my purposes for keeping a reflective journal.

Recording Reflections

Entries were normally made directly after the lessons, but on occasion notes were made during a lesson, or at home during the same evening. As mentioned above, I also made notes on informal discussions I had had with Susan in the office regarding her classes and the course.

Generalizability

Generalizability more frequently applies to quantitative research because of the fact that qualitative studies are usually much smaller and it is therefore not usually possible to think about generalising. However, that is not to say that

generalisations cannot be made to qualitative research. As Smith (2017) points out, qualitative research can generalise through transferability. This means that readers can apply the research to their own context. This has also been termed as 'naturalistic generalization' (Stake, 1995). It is more reader led/directed, in terms of how it relates to their own experiences and circumstances. Concerning my own research, this could be the case for other practitioners in the wider GCC, or even in other educational Institutes in Bahrain. For example, they may want to use the same texts in their classes with a very similar pedagogical approach. Smith (2017) also discusses analytical generalisation, which is when the concepts or theories of the research are generalizable. The concept of devising a course which first teaches analytical skills and then critical literacy in a GCC country could be generalizable to other GCC countries with similar institutions. This is a 'moderatum generalization' (Payne & Williams, 2005). Such a generalization emerges from personal experience and is both a moderate claim and moderately held (Payne & Williams, 2005). For example, when I refer above to similar Institutions in other GCC countries, I mean Institutions where large intakes of students have been educated mainly in Arabic, in government institutions, and have been learning English as a Second Language. They then enter higher education where the language of instruction is English, and are often taught by western instructors who may hold preconceptions of the skills and abilities students have upon graduating from high school that may not be accurate. Finally, in generalizing through theoretical inference, Gobo (2009, in Silverman, 2011) explains deductive inference as "choosing a critical or deviant case which can be used (a la Popper) to prove the refutability of an accredited or standard theory" (Gobo, 2009; in Silverman 2011:386). I approach discussion of deductive inference with caution, as I have not read any research that says it is not possible to teach critical literacy in the GCC. However, the lack of research in this area could be indicative of a perception of it being almost impossible to successfully teach critical literacy in the region. My research aims to demonstrate that although not without its challenges, given very careful planning and skilful teaching, it is possible to achieve critically literate students over a period of time.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has situated the research questions and discussed the different research paradigms, viewing them as being on more of a continuum with one another rather than as opposing entities. The research approach of action research was set out. A discussion followed on the necessity for evaluation. Validity and trustworthiness were addressed, demonstrating the steps taken to ensure the research was conducted in a rigorous and ethical manner. Reflexivity was defined and the importance of incorporating it into the research was highlighted. It detailed the various stages covered in designing and implementing the course, and how the data were collected using different methods, from interviews and questionnaires to weekly meetings with Susan and the keeping of a reflective journal. It has also justified the design decisions that were taken and illustrated how these were informed by the literature. A detailed account of, and rationale for, the content of the course was provided. This included a justification to begin with analytical reading before moving on to critical literacy later in the course. It has also demonstrated that ethical considerations were given close attention throughout the project. Finally the generalizability of the project was considered. The next chapter will discuss the findings of the project.

Chapter 4

Findings

Introduction

As previous chapters have established, the research context is part of what makes this action research project unique. The research context influenced all areas of this project, from selection of texts to the ways in which the course was taught and the direction of class discussions. However, the research context is not the only contributing factor to the project's distinctiveness. The originality of the course design is also of key significance. The socio-political context of Bahrain influenced the course design, but so did the fact that the majority of students had had little exposure to analysis prior to taking the course. This was expected and it meant that the first half of the course primarily focused on analysis, before we could move on to teaching critical literacy. This means that we were teaching concepts to which some students in the United Kingdom have access much earlier in their educational lives.

The findings have been presented thematically. This decision was taken because the data were analysed thematically and therefore it made sense to present the findings in this way. There were other ways the data could have been presented, for example by focusing on each individual topic that was covered in the course, or by taking each research question in turn. However, the former would have resulted in a fragmented narrative while the research questions can be clearly addressed in the discussion chapter that follows. The main themes that emerged from a fine-grained analysis of the data were: selection of texts; issues of student engagement; genres of texts; challenges and achievements for both students and tutors; pedagogical approaches and procedural versus declarative knowledge. While these themes were interwoven with each other, they will be discussed individually to achieve clarity of exposition and, in addition, relevant evidence will be drawn from the different data sets to support interpretation. At the same time, connections will be made to the existing literature to demonstrate new contributions to knowledge. These

include the design and implementation of a course written to teach analysis and critical literacy skills to students in higher education, appropriate to the context of the country. Illustrative examples will be taken from the data to show how my findings address the gap in the literature regarding critical literacy not being taught in the GCC, and also what they are adding to it. After a full discussion has taken place, a concise summary of the findings will be provided at the end of the chapter.

Selection of Texts

The rationale for the text selection has been discussed in the preceding chapter. The selection of texts was crucial given the teaching context. Bahrain is not a democracy and although liberal in some respects, discussions in areas regarding politics, religion and any critique of the country are not allowed and would have been met with serious consequences, as I have previously stated. A lot of thought therefore went into choosing texts that would not cause offence to the students or get Susan or me into trouble with the institution or wider government authorities. These constraints limited the degree to which critical literacy could be brought into play. Susan noted this in her pre-course interview:

> And it's also limiting sometimes in the type of materials you'd like to provide. If you kind of think, that would be a really interesting discussion, like today I've been trying to find stuff to, articles about seeing things, opinions, seeing things from the other side but you tend to be limited if there's, you can't always have, you know you can't include readings about you know, religion or gender issues or this, that and the other. It's disappointing that you can't always be quite as adventurous in your resources as you'd like to be.

Susan had been looking for texts that used multiple narrative perspectives. This excerpt illustrates the challenges faced in sourcing appropriate material that still allowed students to achieve the learning objectives for this particular teaching context. It also demonstrates clear teacher awareness of the norms of the teaching context in terms of what would be deemed acceptable. Susan's extensive experience of teaching in a Gulf context was beneficial here. One

student also picked up on the limiting nature of the texts used in the first half of the course:

> One thing I found least interesting is that although the lesson taught is great, some of the materials used to teach the lessons in the course were very bland, noncontroversial, not something that would engage your mind fully and raise your eyebrows.

This extract highlights the dilemma between engaging students by presenting them with texts that were somewhat provocative and being respectful of the host country. It illustrates the student's desire to have their beliefs challenged and to be repositioned as a reader. One of the challenges Yulianto (2015) found in Indonesia (also a Muslim country) when using critical pedagogy principles was the lack of classroom-friendly authentic controversial reading materials. At the same time though, students seemed aware of the limitations on the types of texts and issues that could be discussed. Susan told the following story of a student in her class:

> So like, one of the boys, I can't remember what ad[vertisement] it was, it was something involving bare boobs, a women like that [folds arms across chest] and there was a man doing something similar…and he was saying Miss, I want to discuss something like this, but I can't can I?

This demonstrates the cultural limitations that were experienced, not only by me in selecting texts, but also by the students. There is also a clash of cultures here in terms of the types of texts to which students have access and exposure, largely from the internet, and what their culture and religion deem appropriate viewing and allow people to acknowledge. Students clearly knew they were bound by these two elements, and the question posed by the student in the excerpt above illustrates the frustration that was felt by a number of students throughout the course. This issue was alluded to again in the discussion of fake news. One student announced that "some countries are free to tell the truth and some countries are not." It was not appropriate for me to probe this statement further but it revealed an awareness of the limitations faced by people in different countries.

The selection of texts also opens up a discussion on the issues of power. There is the power of the author as the composer of the text and my own power as the curriculum writer in choosing the texts. I did feel constrained by the cultural limitations placed upon me. This meant I was not always able to choose the texts that were most fit for purpose. An example of this was when teaching the analysis of advertisements I did not feel the texts selected were 'meaty' enough. Students were often given the opportunity to select their own texts, both in class assigned tasks and for the first two assessments and this formed part of the negotiated curriculum. In discussing whether Susan thought critical literacy was to do with power, she responded:

> Uhh, yes I do because I think whoever is on the preparation side of the text has or might think that they have the power because that is what they are wanting people to, they are expecting a certain response or hoping for a certain response but I think power is also in the hands of the receiver, so that if they are more critically literate they will be more empowered so it is not, I don't know, that there's a pot of power transferred across but, people who are more critically literate will have, be more informed, they will be able to make more rational judgements, they will be less, hopefully they will be less em, following a certain path that has been suggested by the text creator.

Susan was suggesting here that as a result of being critically literate, there is a more equal balance of power between the author of the text and the reader. This reassignment of power benefits the reader because they would be more inclined to read against the text instead of passively accepting the viewpoint put forward by the author.

It also proved challenging to select texts from the student's own context. In teaching, I found that quite often there was too much distance between the student's own life and the studied experience. Fredericks (2007) found that texts have to be culturally relevant for students to engage successfully. The selection of texts from other cultural contexts proved challenging for students because they did not always have the appropriate background knowledge to make full sense of the texts under study. This was evident when we studied fairytales from different cultures. Susan commented that she found this topic least engaging to teach because the students' "cultural knowledge was not

always wide enough to make the best use of that activity." The activity being referred to was the comparison of the different versions of Cinderella from the various cultural perspectives presented by each author. The inclusion in the curriculum of the Arabic cartoon *Freej* was the only text that had cultural relevance for students. For me, this was the text with which I felt students were most engaged. 19 students (63.3%) found the visual literacies topic not at all difficult. One reason for this was because they found the topic accessible but I think it was significant that this text was in Arabic with English subtitles. Students reacted with quite a bit of laughter when viewing both episodes, so they clearly appreciated the humour. They concluded that it was easier to relate to an Arabic text so it was more enjoyable for them to conduct the critical analysis. Susan also felt this topic resonated well with the students:

> They loved it, they really enjoyed it. And I think the timing was actually quite good for that because it's okay, we're nearly at the end. I really, it was engrossing enough to stimulate their, their minds and stuff like that but at the same time, it wasn't, it was quite a bit more entertaining than some of the other topics.

They were also able to relate to this text considerably more than to others. One student reflected of the task in assessment 4 that: "every question was quite interesting but I chose the third question [relating to *Freej*] because it somehow relates to my identity and where I come from." Another student said that Um Saeed (one of the main characters) reminded him of his own grandmother because she used to hit him with a stick! The ensuing discussion, having watched the *Jameela* episode, centred around gender stereotyping but also examined the influence of Western culture. Students had strong opinions on this and I recorded in my journal that a number of students said things like "do you want me to be honest and tell you the truth?" The fact that this topic was taught in week 14 of the course is significant because it shows that the class environment was regarded as a safe space where students felt comfortable enough to express their true thoughts. Susan also alluded to the "good comfort level within the classes". Visual literacies was clearly a topic with which students felt confident and happy to engage and the reason for this could have

been because of the type of text used for this task. Students discussed the clashes between the older and younger generations that featured in this animation but they could not say why there was such a struggle. In their writing, they were able to identify the general moral of the episode: "They're telling Arab, especially GCC countries, that they should hold on to their culture and traditions. Because that what makes us who we are." But during class discussions, there was a lot of conversation about how younger people in the GCC tend to be heavily influenced by Western culture and there was general agreement that this was a bad thing. The interesting thing was that they appeared to blame Jameela's mother for the way in which she had brought up her daughter to be more Western, rather than recognising wider societal factors. Given the context, I felt inhibited to point them to these wider societal factors.

Although the majority of students were happy with the selection of texts, there was one student response that was an outlier. One student in my class, when completing the end of course survey questionnaire, wrote that they did not enjoy studying the following topics: picturebooks, fairytales, *Lord of the Flies* and fake news. Their reason for not enjoying these topics was "politics and unwanted topics…[sic] imaginary or unacceptable topics." Despite the degree of thought that had gone into the selection of texts, this student still found some of the material inappropriate. When asked if the course aim was met, the student said they neither agreed or disagreed and in explaining their answer said: "most of the course lessons have nothing to do or not suitable for our country and religion." This student's suggestion for how to improve the course for the future was: "respect to the country the course is given at and giving more acceptable lessons." However, this negative, critical response came from only one of thirty students; others were very positive.

The negative comment could be because of my insider/outsider positioning. Although I strived to use my positioning as a long-standing member of staff in both the institution and as a resident of Bahrain, to help me select appropriate texts and keep class discussions within societal boundaries, I was not a Muslim

and I was not an Arab. The student in question clearly thought that I was being disrespectful to their culture in both the early stages of analysis and later in the teaching of critical literacy. My positioning as an outsider may well have made it easier for certain students to resist central messages. However, resistance might still have been displayed to an 'insider' presenting the same messages, and therefore cannot straightforwardly be seen as a consequence of my outsider status. There are examples in the literature where other practitioners have faced resistance in different contexts (Petrone et al, 2012), so I did expect this to happen to me as well, to some extent. The implications of this will be discussed in the next chapter.

Genre of Text

One of my motivations for the design of the course was to ensure that students were exposed to a variety of different genres of text. This was important because, (as detailed in the literature review), I wanted to widen students' definitions of what a text is and introduce them to the different types of texts we can all read and analyse. I used the first half of the course to teach analytical reading and the second half to teach critical literacy. More attention should be given to this in the literature as, regardless of the teaching context, students will find it very difficult to understand and use critical literacy approaches to reading if they do not have experience of analysing texts. Huh (2016) found that when balancing conventional and critical literacy in her South Korean university classroom "when comprehension broke down, the students were not able to move on with unpacking the ideological underpinnings of the text" (228). This lack of understanding from the students prevented Huh from working on critical literacy and this also highlights why the selection of texts was so important. Moving from analysis to critical literacy, it was important that I ensured that I did not repeat genres of texts that had already been studied. Although there is an argument for this, in that it may make sense having taught analysis using a particular genre, to then move to critical literacy in the same genre, I wanted to expose my students to as wide a range of genres of text as

possible, so that they would gain a broader understanding of 'text'. Also, I was concerned that my students might become bored as a result of any repetition.

Ten students (33.3%) were surprised at the types of texts used on this course. However, they expressed their surprise in a positive way. In the pre-course questionnaire, students said that academic texts and fiction were the two most widely-used genres of text used to read in English in the English classroom, demonstrating their unfamiliarity with the type of texts I was introducing them to in an academic context. The three most surprising genres for students seemed to be picture books, fairytales and fake news. "It came as a shock that the course would involve picture books and fairy tales but they were a nice addition." The shock this student felt towards studying these genres suggests that they initially felt these texts had very little to offer adult readers. Another student commented: "I didn't expect us to read something about fake news or have picture books, I thought that the course would be all about novels and books to read." This suggests that the student had a more conventional approach to reading and hints at a lack of exposure to other text types in their previous educational experience. Each of the three genres mentioned by the students will now be discussed in turn.

Picture books

Picture books were introduced early on in the course as 28 students indicated that picture books were used to teach them how to read in Arabic. This meant that it was a form and genre with which they were familiar from childhood. When asked in class what their memories were of English picture books, no students were able to identify any texts. In their reflection, one student commented: "it was interesting to know picture books are for adults as well." This demonstrates that the student did not previously consider this genre for adult readers. It also points to the depth of analysis that occurred and the quality of both whole class and group discussions surrounding this genre, suggesting that students learned a lot from a genre they had previously categorized as exclusively for children. Susan identified the strength in having a

variety of different types of picture books. One group did not consider *Voices in the Park* a children's story as they believed the message behind it was for adults and that the story reflected real-life situations. According to Susan, no students in her class considered the texts to be "juvenile." Students were asked to submit a paragraph after the analysis of the four picture books, stating which one they had found most interesting. They were also asked to consider the following:

> 1) what kind of view of the world is the text presenting?
>
> 2) what serious point is the text making about society?

Out of twenty submissions, ten students favoured *The Red Tree.* This was despite initial comments from students during analysis such as "I don't understand it" and "It's like a trailer, it's not the full story." I think students felt this way because they were not being told what to think. It was their responsibility to make sense of the story. This was also the case with *The Arrival.* Students reported feeling "lost" while reading it and most agreed "it's so hard to understand without words." The level of complexity of analysis varied among students. In discussing *The Red Tree*, one student wrote:

> I find the text to be quite interesting as its emotional and also inspires us to never give up and that whenever life hits us with an obstacle it's not the end of the world and we should stay strong as there is always hope at the end.

Similarly, another student reported:

> If however one would look closer at those images they contain a meaning that both corresponds and completes the few words on the page. This book showed images of loneliness, sadness, confusion and hopelessness. It is taking the world from the perspective of depressed people and in the end it tries to brighten up that perspective.

Both these students demonstrated an understanding of what was a quite literal interpretation of the narrative, and by this I mean the author's intended message. Others read much more deeply:

> the story engaged to me through the feelings that someone would get from the surrounding environment of people attacking your abilities or place in society… the text shows the effect of society towards the sensitive or on ones that have distrust on their selves.

I think what the student was alluding to in this excerpt was the protagonist being under threat and not having the confidence or inner strength to assert herself in her environment and therefore becoming almost invisible to society, in a sense. Another student wrote:

> I found *The Red Tree* by Shaun Tan the most interesting picture book, the most interesting text was when it says the world is a deaf machine because it shows the idea that society is a place that values conformity and disagrees with singular expression and vision, it shows us how life will not always happen the way you want it to.

This student has identified one of the key themes of the text, namely our lack of control regarding what life throws at us, which is expressed through the fairly abstract images in the text. The student has an interesting understanding and interpretation of the extract chosen from the text, and this perhaps reflects their own experience in life so far. It could also be reflective of Bahraini society. Individuals who react against the status quo can be harshly punished.

Despite the relatively high engagement of students with picture books, very few students decided to write their first assessment on these. This was perhaps because of their limited access to texts, as there is only one public library in Bahrain and there is a limited number of bookstores. In addition to this, a lack of familiarity with English picture books also contributed to students being more inclined to write about advertisements rather than picture books.

Fairytales

Fairytales are most commonly used in the literature to teach critical literacy skills to early primary school children. However, I decided this was an appropriate genre of text to include in the course because many are sophisticated texts that allow for in-depth analysis. I selected the fairytale Cinderella for study because it is a universal story and therefore I knew that most students would be familiar with it. They did know the story, and in our

pre-analysis task students identified with the Disney version. In choosing four different versions of Cinderella, I hoped that students would draw cultural comparisons centred on gender and recognise how different cultures had constructed the Cinderella character. In *The Persian Cinderella*, the Cinderella character of Settareh appears to have much more control over her own fate in the beginning. The Queen (the Prince's mother) is also portrayed as an assertive character:

> "How can a man look for a maiden?" asked Mehrdad's mother, the Queen. "What do you know of women and their ways?" She rose. "I myself will find the owner of that anklet."

Susan expressed her view that students did not have enough background knowledge of the cultures being discussed (for example in *The Chinese Cinderella*) to carry out an effective analysis. She reported that students made very surface observations, mostly in relation to the images, for example by commenting on the different clothes being worn or the food being eaten, and she labelled this "superficial analysis". I had a very similar experience with my students but I did not agree with Susan's comment as such observations by the students were valid. This was how Cinderella was being characterised in that particular text. One student, in describing fairytales among the topics they found difficult, commented that it was "maybe because I did not have social awareness." These remarks could indicate that students needed much more guidance/scaffolding to be able to complete the analysis successfully. A way to achieve this would perhaps be only to look at *The Persian Cinderella*, as it is closer to the students' own culture and is therefore less 'foreign'. When completing assessment 2, students appeared confident when explaining how their selected texts would be different were they to be retold in a Gulf context. One student wrote of *The Ugly Duckling*:

> If it was written nowadays in the GCC region, and the Ugly Duckling was abandoned but then is seen visiting the Mosque and committed to religion. It would directly come to sense the beauty within the good-hearted duckling that despite his ugliness he knows God and that is beauty to the community; culturally devoting to religion the correct way, is beautiful to the culture. Therefore, the twist in the plot to fit the

> culture would be, instead of the duck changes into a swan, the ugly duckling would stay ugly but would grow an Islamic beard or if the duck was female it would wear a hijab. As the beard and the hijab would represent beauty and honour and that is beauty to the region culture.

Even allowing for the possibility that this student was being ironic, this excerpt demonstrates how entwined religion is with culture. One of Susan's comments was that "their lack of world knowledge meant they couldn't complete the task as well as we would have liked." I think in this comment she meant lack of cultural knowledge and therefore having a more focused approach on one text would allow me to centre more on the representations of gender according to each culture and start to embed a more critically literate analysis. This would also be in line with Susan's concern that there wasn't enough time to complete the analysis on all four texts.

The course challenged students' perceptions of text through opening their eyes to different genres of texts. None of these genres was new to the students but I think that their surprise stemmed from the fact they had not considered these texts as significant in communicating so much meaning. Susan made a similar point:

> Um, I think some of them ended up a bit, because their concepts of reading and text were constrained, oh I have to read a book, once we started getting into the other definitions or explanations of what is meant by text, and what is meant by reading and exposing them to the different, the different activities and word forms, I think lots of them, I think they enjoyed it a lot more than they thought they would.

Susan's use of the word "enjoyed" here suggests that students were engaged in the study of the various genres of text. In addition to this, the presentation of these texts in an academic context was also a new experience for most of these students. Only one student said "it didn't add anything to what I already learned in school."

Fake News

Fake news was a genre that had to be presented to students in a unique way. Rather than focus on news websites and newspapers, I decided to make this

about what we read more widely on the internet. This was because 21 students (61.8%) of students indicated that they never or almost never read newspapers in English, with only 1 student (2.9%) saying they did every day or almost every day. It is possible that I had worded this question incorrectly, by not also asking about news websites; however, from my teaching and classroom discussions, I was able to deduce that the students had had very little exposure to world news. In addition, there was an incident when we were studying advertisements that made me realise we needed to look at what is published on the internet. This is an excerpt from my reflective journal:

> Adverts were selected [by students] in the previous class. One group chose a *Red Bull* advert. They were doing research to find out when it originated, and found an advert in black and white that stated the drink was invented in 1795! They thought this was true because it was on the internet and it was what they read. Even when I gently questioned them about the truth factor, they continued to assert it was true because the 'fake' advert said so. This makes me think we need to spend some time teaching them how to distinguish between 'truth' and 'fact', and what is made up. I was shocked that they could believe that *Red Bull* existed in the 18th century!

Considering that 25 students (73.5%) said they read websites/social media in English every day or almost every day, it was what was published on the internet that became the focus of learning here. We began by defining fake news and watched a TED (Technology, Entertainment and Design) talk by Noah Tavlin on *How Fake News Can Spread*[25]. We discussed the post-viewing questions that followed on from the talk on the TED website. A few students dominated this discussion and I noted in my journal that it would have been better if I had put the questions into a Kahoot or Socrative quiz (an online interactive quiz that each student can participate in through answering the questions using their mobile phones) to increase student engagement and participation. We looked at different types of fake news: satirical news; the daily clickbait; and outright invented news. Susan commented on her experience of teaching this topic:

[25] https://ed.ted.com/lessons/how-false-news-can-spread-noah-tavlin

> And I don't know whether it's a problem, I don't know whether it is an issue, or whether it just is, but fake news my guys were all immediately going on about Donald Trump. And you know, we could have had 2-hour lessons on that and it's appropriateness and of course we can't really. And that was actually, yeh in fact that was actually, I think that was the most challenging topic because there were times when we'd be talking about who is putting the news out, control of the media and all that kind of thing, and we were having the thing you in the corner, please don't, don't, so there were times when that was, the topic is not inappropriate but some of the examples they wanted to use, in this setting we couldn't discuss.

Susan's point seems to be that even with careful selection of texts, a topic can 'run away' unpredictably into unforeseen, and possibly dangerous directions. This pedagogical challenge will be discussed at a later section in this chapter.

Novel to Film Adaptions

Given that they were the most popular genre of study, novel to film adaptions will also be discussed here. 21 students said that it was a topic they enjoyed studying, with only 2 students saying they did not enjoy studying it. This far exceeded the next most enjoyable genres of advertisements and picture books, both of which were enjoyed by 16 students. This genre enabled us to study moving visual images in a way we had not been able to do when looking at advertising because we focused on print media rather than the moving image. We were able to freeze frames of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* and discuss sound and camera angles, as well as visual signs and signifiers. We focused on how these acted to position the reader in a certain way in order to create meaning. 25 students (73.5%) chose this topic for their second assessment.

Pedagogical Approaches

The pedagogical approaches adopted for the lessons were unique for the institution. They centred on class discussion and group discussion. In my reflective journal I have recorded how initially I found these difficult to manage. Susan expressed similar concerns. Kim & Pollard (2017), when implementing a critical pedagogy for EFL in a South Korean university, found that both students and teachers found the project stressful because of the shift from a teacher-

centred to a student-centred paradigm, and a shift in the teacher role from directive to facilitative. Some students were more receptive than others to the 'new' classroom in terms of their participation and engagement. Seventeen students (56.7%) found whole class discussions engaging or very engaging, with a further five students (16.7%) found it moderately engaging. Four students (13.3%) found it slightly engaging and another four students (13.3%) found it to be not at all engaging. I think this was due to the variations in comfort levels of certain students being able to express their viewpoints. One student stated in the assessment 4 reflection that:

> I find it easier to work with people I get along with and have things in common with because we can add onto each other's ideas and work more effectively and comfortably because we won't hold our thoughts or ideas back with people we are comfortable working with.

This highlights the ease with which this student was able to function in a small group environment. It could be read that this student felt apprehension in expressing themselves in a whole class discussion as they may not have felt comfortable with all members of the class. Susan commented on the classroom dynamics:

> I had one member that was extremely quiet, extremely quiet, would not speak, or discuss with other students, even in a group of two or three. And then I had one person in particular who was very dominant and opinionated…But I think there may well have been some others in the class that would have liked to have differed with this person but were not particularly confident in expressing themselves in the face of his rather bombastic character.

Although students were involved at the beginning of the course in constructing ground rules for discussion in terms of respect for and attentiveness to each other's 'voices' and about 'air-time', in practice this was more difficult in some cases to carry out. In Yulainto's (2015) case study on the use of critical pedagogy principles in teaching EFL reading, he found that two of the four major categories of activity that enabled students to think critically were distributing classroom power and creating space for students' voices to be heard. I think the difficulty for Susan and me was that these things take time to

achieve but by the end of the course, I think we were successful in creating safe spaces for students to speak where the power balance between teacher and students was shared. Part of this was encouraging not only whole class discussions but smaller group discussions among students. Wells (1999) found that this enhanced student understanding, especially when topics were new or unfamiliar. One student reflected on the unique pedagogical approach of the course:

> The whole course made me feel excited, what I mean by that is I've never been involved at a course were most of the time activities were the main focus during the classroom and that we had to work as groups and discover many different things together is something new to me. I'd say this course is probably one of the few courses that really enhanced my abilities as a student…the good things about the course were that I had never been involved that much in a classroom before so that is a positive aspect for me.

This student clearly felt that they were a key participant in the class. This suggests that at least for some participants a student-centred approach had been successfully achieved. It also demonstrates that the tasks assigned to students were designed to allow them to develop and share their own thoughts and opinions, rather than relying on what the teacher told them. Reporting on the group project which formed part of assessment 4, one student concluded: " I enjoyed working on this group project. I appreciate projects which help me learn new things, not just from a tutor during a lesson, but from my fellow students as well." This emphasises the role of the tutor as facilitator. When asked what they did when they read something they did not understand in Arabic, 19 (55.9%) said that they asked someone else, rather than found out by their own means, for example through consulting a dictionary. I also wanted to teach students to be more self-reliant when it came to conducting their analyses because when it came to critical literacy, it was about students becoming more empowered as readers through thinking for themselves, beyond what the author or their teacher wanted/told them to think. One student declared: "depending on others to figure out information for me is no longer a necessity as through the course I have gained the necessary skills to do so by myself."

Facilitating the class discussion had its challenges at times because of the cultural boundaries that were in place and although students were often prepared to take the discussions much further, we would suddenly be reminded of where we were, as Susan illustrated:

> …it would have been really interesting to have been able to discuss at much greater length sexism in advertising and are you aware of it and you know who is it [sic] appealing to and all that stuff. Yeh, there were a couple of times I had to, but whenever I had to say it, they knew it, it wasn't as if, it wasn't a question of what is she talking about. They were kind of like, okay, we'll change the subject.

This placed limits on the extent to which I can say I was teaching critical literacy because some discussions had to be cut off prematurely.

Challenges and Achievements

The course began by teaching students the foundations of analysis, as it was of central importance that I taught critical analysis and the accompanying meta-language, giving the students the opportunity to practise this before moving on to teach critical literacy. 60% of students found the first topic of advertisements difficult to some degree. This was reiterated through the mid-course reflections as an area they found challenging to study. One student reflected:

> I found analyzing the advertisements part is challenging. Because you have to have your full attention on the advert and you have to think in unusual way in order to understand the whole concept. For example, in my first assignment I had a hard time analyzing the adverts that I have choose. Because all of them have a hidden message to deliver to the audience. I had to focus really hard to find what is the message all about.

This labelling of an "unusual way" of thinking demonstrates that the student is not used to analysing a text and it was something that was relatively new to them. It also shows that the student was taking the task seriously, engaging with the text closely. This point was reiterated in the comment of another student, who wrote:

> The most challenging thin[sic] in this class is reading the ideas behind the advertisements because I have to elaborate on every single detail in

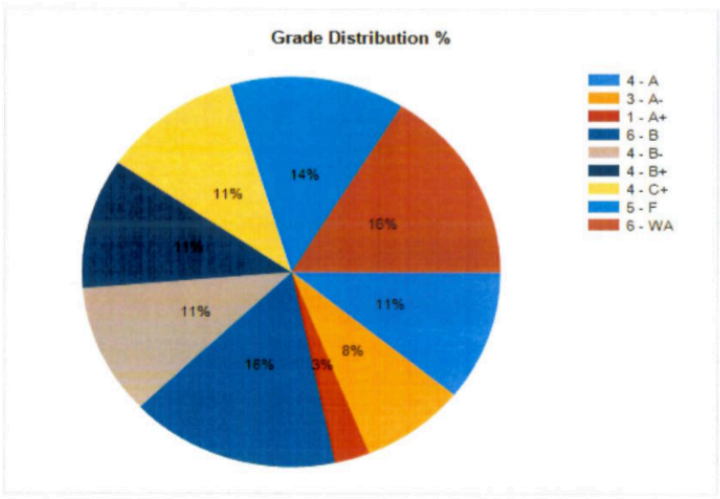
> the picture to give a clear understanding of what is being said. Not all advertisements have a clear message so this makes it challenging to find out what is it all about.

This is a large part of the reason that I did not also integrate media advertisements into this topic. I felt that this would be too overwhelming for students at this early stage in the course. My aim was to help them to build up skills in reading print/still visual texts before adding the additional reading tools that come with moving images.

One student, when discussing why they found the majority of topics studied moderately difficult, explained: "it wasn't difficult to understand, it was difficult to do." This highlights the gulf between declarative and procedural knowledge (which will be discussed in the next section), and points to the struggles a lot of students seemed to experience in carrying out the analysis and subsequent critical literacy. This struggle was evident through some of the assessments that were submitted, especially the first assessment. In speaking about some of the assessment 1 submissions, Susan said:

> I think quite often we ended up with ads about perfume and shampoo and things like that and most of the images that appeared on those were a bit dry and a bit conventional and oh yes, he is a famous actor and whatever and in another culture we could have had a lot more interest.

As well as the challenges that were faced by many students, there were also achievements. The pie chart below shows the final overall grade distribution for the course. A WA grade refers to students who dropped out of the course or exceeded a 20% absence rate.



Grade	Count	%
A	4	10.81%
A-	3	8.11%
A+	1	2.70%
B	6	16.22%
B-	4	10.81%
B+	4	10.81%
C+	4	10.81%
F	5	13.51%
WA	6	16.22%
Total	37	100.00%

Figure 4.1 Final course grade distribution

There were five students who failed the course. It is significant that these five students were in my class, as it consisted of Foundation students (who had completed the English language requirements at that level and were therefore eligible to enrol on degree Electives). In Foundation, the Math and English courses are level 4 courses, while degree Electives are level 6 courses (on the National Qualifications Framework). Thus, it was their first experience of engaging in work at a higher level and while three of them struggled to produce work at this level (receiving a fail grade for a resubmission of an assessment – one of the three failed two of the resubmissions), the remaining two students stopped coming to class in the final weeks (but did not exceed a 20% absence rate) and did not submit assessment 4, thus receiving a fail grade for the course, as each assessment was a must-pass component. Interestingly, both of these students failed assessment 3, but did not edit and resubmit this assignment.

The overall success of this course was reflected partly in the high pass rates. Students also had a clear understanding of the topics that had been studied. Only one student was unable to say what critical reading involved. Other

students were able to describe the process: “It involves reading between the lines and understand more than what is simply said.” This student clearly understood that the reader needs to look behind the text in order fully to comprehend it. One student put this succinctly: “Critical reading is going beyond the text.” Another student suggested that it was a “more complex and deeper engagement with the text.” These students had grasped what it meant to read critically but as I read through their responses I felt myself asking, what does it mean to the student to go beyond the text? How would the student engage more deeply in the text? In summary, did the students understand the full implications of their statements? The responses above came from the end of course survey questionnaires, but when students had the opportunity in assessment 4 to reflect on what it meant to read critically, their responses were more detailed:

> It was amazing that you can see things you did not consider them before and looking from the writer [sic] view and how he want the readers to see the text and feel about it. When you can consider all of this you will be able to get the whole idea behind the text which [sic] called critical reading. Critical reading could be related to critical writing, because when you get the idea you will be able to write better, also the right way to discovering fake news, articles and websites.

This student recognises the importance of not only viewing the text from multiple perspectives but also considering the purpose(s) and motivations of the author. Of further interest is the fact that this student made links to critical writing.

In addition to this, 25 students (83.3%) thought that critical reading was important. 21 students (70%) felt that the course empowered them as readers:

> It has shown me the value of different types of reading that once might’ve seemed not complex enough. Things such as fairy tales and advertisements play a larger role in our lives and culture than I had given them credit for.

This excerpt suggests that the student was able to relate the selection of texts to their own life, which was something I was worried about when using such

international texts when designing the course but this turned out to be an unsubstantiated concern.

> After taking this course, I started noticing stuff I could not notice before. Not only in regard of reading but also in beliefs and thoughts. This does not seem relevant, but now I am able to analyse scientific theories better than before!

This student has recognised the value of being able to use the critical reading skills learned in one context in other academic subjects. Another student noted:

> The newly acquired reading skills will help me in the business field because I will be able to look deeper into things and analyse them more efficiently. For example: if I were to enter the marketing field, it would help me create better advertisements because I will be able to think deeply and be able to make proper adverts that would make sense and send the right message to the target audience.

Susan also recognised the:

> transfer to not just reading but other activities and I think it would be particularly useful in the college setting as well so that students are just a little bit more open-minded with information they receive and react accordingly rather than with too many pre-conceived notions.

Yet another student also noted their personal progress throughout the course: "as a reader I am now capable of understanding and analysing a text easily and not just blind reading." The student was used to reading passively and not questioning the text. "Blind reading" is an interesting metaphor to use.

In terms of training new teachers in critical literacy, the successful integration of a teacher into the course who had had very little background in critical literacy is significant. However, there were challenges faced by Susan and me in our role as teachers, in addition to the difficulty with selecting appropriate texts which has already been discussed. Some of these challenges were expected. In the pre-course interview, I asked Susan if she thought there were risks associated with teaching critical literacy in Bahrain. She replied:

> I think there are potential risks. Uh, and I think you and I are probably both aware of them. Um, because I think although, you don't want to open too many cans of worms. Okay, so although you want to, and I would say the risks are as much for us than they are, maybe more so, for

> us than for our students, because although we want them to be saying there are two sides to every story, in some situations here there aren't two sides to every story, there's one side to the story.

This is a critical point because Bahraini citizens are not allowed to challenge, or even question, the status quo and prominent figures who have spoken out against the ruling regime have been arrested and eventually had their citizenship revoked. Susan has outlined the dilemma between needing to educate students to enable them to see things from multiple perspectives and the detrimental effect it could have on their lives were these skills then used in the 'wrong' context.

Susan identified the topic of fake news as the most challenging to deliver:

> I think that was the most challenging topic because there were times when we'd be talking about who is putting the news out, control of the media and all that kind of thing…But the thing was, you really really wanted to be able to discuss it. That was the most aggravating thing. It's kind of like yes, you know we should be discussing this, you need to know this, you probably already do know this, we need to hear your viewpoint and your viewpoint, but we couldn't. So that was, that was, I think that was the one where we were in danger of getting too political, too confrontational, too opinionated, and we just couldn't.

Her use of the word "we" highlights constraints for the students as well as the teachers. Susan expressed her frustration at this. This frustration was not experienced solely with the topic of Fake News. When we viewed the TED talk: *The Danger of a Single Story* during the topic of Picture books, we were looking at stereotypes and how we stereotype others and how we ourselves are stereotyped. The latter came up in both my class and Susan's class in terms of Arabs being stereotyped as terrorists and Susan commented that she didn't pursue this comment as:

> it was more than I was prepared to handle…Not only was I constraining their responses, I was also constraining myself…you know, I could have given a lot of opinion on that particular topic but as you say, the geography of the place, that would not have been appropriate.

As a result of the success of our post-video discussion in my class of this TED talk, in an in-the-moment teaching decision, I decided to ask my students to write about one of the following possible scenarios:

> a) you were guilty of embracing a stereotype of someone or a place and reflecting on this

OR

> b) imagine that, like the author in the TED talk, you were going to the US to study. How do you think your American roommate would perceive you?

I was hoping that this writing task would encourage reflection and make students more perceptive in their analysis of picture books in the following lessons. I think that it definitely achieved this. Students felt strongly that stereotypes were largely negative, and they commented on how they felt they had been stereotyped in the past (as being terrorists, or wealthy). They were beginning to understand the importance of not viewing something from a single perspective, but considering alternative viewpoints.

The biggest achievement for me personally was the successful integration of the Arabic text *Freej* into the course. It provided students with the opportunity to analyse critically a text from their own culture. It enabled us to discuss gender issues in society, and the impact of crossing cultural boundaries. The students displayed a high level of engagement with this text, which was evident through the rich class discussions that took place.

Course Design

Because this was an action research project, the actual design of the course can itself be seen as a finding. My argument is that in an action research project it is valuable to point up the ongoing, responsive processes of course design, rather than treating course design simply as an achieved object. I structured the course carefully, beginning with texts that I thought would be most accessible to the

students. The positioning of the various topics in the sequence of lessons was also significant as the course moved from analysis to critical literacy. The type of text was also of central importance as has already been discussed. I also made on the spot decisions as mentioned in the previous section to include additional activities when it was clear that they would be valuable at that point.

The main strength of the course was how I was able to balance the teaching of analytical and critical reading, establishing a foundation of analytical reading and then build on this to teach critical literacy to students, as has already been mentioned numerous times. When Susan was asked if she thought this balance was correct, she responded:

> Em, I am going to say no, and that is because for me I didn't really see when we were doing analysis and when we were doing critical analysis. Now that also might be yes, that might be yes, because, I didn't notice a boundary between one and the other. I think, I mean it was a fairly seamless transition.

This suggests that for Susan, the two were more interlinked than I had thought. This was emphasised when I examined the responses of students to the question 'what do we do when we analyse a text?' Six students (20%) wrote that we look at the text from different perspectives. For conducting an analysis of the text, I would have expected students to comment on it being the process of examining something in detail, perhaps identifying and discussing themes, symbolism, text and visual signs and signifiers in order to understand it. Two students (6.7%) said that we consider the author's background. The motivation of the author for composing the text again has more to do with being critically literate than being an analytical reader. Other students appreciated the difference but found it challenging to define what it was: "Critical reading is not just reading. But its analysing, evaluating the text" and "Critical reading is similar to analysing, where we look at the bad/good, adv[antages]/dis[advantages]."

We spent a lot of time summarising the various chapters of *Lord of the Flies*, because although they did not admit it, I got the impression from my class that a

number of students had not read it. This was despite the fact that I had set up a number of the weekly one-hour classes as silent sustained reading (SSR) sessions for *Lord of the Flies* with the aim of engaging students with the text. There did not appear to be a strong reading culture of reading Western literature in schools, although this varied between government and private schools. Ten students (29.4%) never or almost never read fictional books in English. Some novels that students had read in school included: *The Secret Garden, The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, Anne Frank*, *Narnia*, and *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. The English course in Government schools does not require students to read fictional novels and the final examination requires them to read only a short passage (which could be fiction or non-fiction) and answer comprehension questions.

Procedural verses Declarative Knowledge

I have already provided evidence that demonstrates how students were able to articulate their understanding of what it means to analyse a text and be critically literate. But in this section, I want to show to what extent students were able to apply their declarative knowledge in their work. This will be achieved through an analysis of student assessments. These will be looked at in order of submission – starting with assessment 1 and progressing to assessment 4. This is in order to chart the move from analysis to critical literacy. The assessments have been set out in the Methodology chapter, but they will be summarised here to remind the reader and provide a clear context for discussion.

There was a choice of two assignment questions for assessment 1. The first question asked students to compare and contrast two advertisements, one aimed at men and one aimed at women for the same or similar products. My aim was for students to analyse the two advertisements in the context of gender and start exploring the multiple perspectives on a text, through first identifying their preferred reading of the text and then considering other readings. Students appeared to have a clear understanding of the purpose of the task: “the way we

perceive adverts can sometimes be different than the company that created them intended for them to be perceived." This shows an awareness of being able to move away from the stock message that the advertiser wished to communicate. There are other interpretations, aside from the one set up for the reader by the advertiser. Another student noted:

> Because the main reason behind an advertisement is to gain profit, an advert isn't always reliable or trust worthy [sic]. The adverts cold [sic] be exaggerating or manipulating with the facts or results of the product itself. Therefore, the customer should always be cautious and careful when it comes to trusting advertisements.

There was a clear awareness of why it is important to analyse advertisements. The depth of analysis across the different submissions varied. The difference that was most significant for me was between those students who read 'with' the text in their analysis and those who read 'against' the text, choosing to challenge the intended message. In analysing this advertisement (figure 4.2), one student wrote:

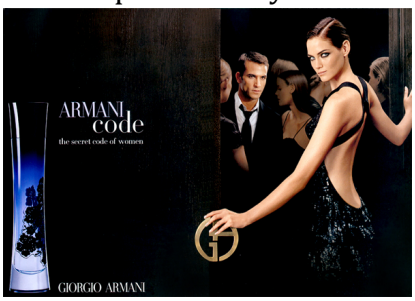


Figure 4.2

> Meanwhile, the background is black yet there is more than just blackness, it sounds like she is about to enter a party or something while a man is focusing right at her and staring at her unstoppably while ignoring the other girls around him like she is the only girl exists. This indicates that if a woman wears the Armani's perfume she will get the attention of men because it fragrant smell, it is so good that they get attracted to her. Furthermore, the lady face expression is filled with satisfaction and arrogance with a little evilly look. It shows how confidence she is while wearing this perfume. The slogan "the secret code of women" tells women in general that this is the secret behind being gorgeous and catchy, if you want to be like her get the perfume!

This student outlined the message that the advertisers wanted to communicate to its audience. This is what I referred to earlier as reading 'with' the text. The same student conducted a similar analysis of the Jimmy Choo 'Man' advertisement (figure 4.3):

The differences here is that the female is not showing her face, they made the pose look different, catchy and mysterious at the same time. By touching the

lady's leg with her high heels on, it is displaying that she is an attractive and an enchanting lady sitting next to him. They mean by this pose that if you get the fragrance you will get the girl. In addition, here he got more of the serious look, confidence and like a king who owns the world.

Figure 4.3

Another student used the same Jimmy Choo advertisement in their assignment, but their analysis was much more critical:

> On the opposite side, the second advertisement for Jimmy Choo's 'MAN' a completely different image and persona is created…The focus is on the man and how he is in power. He sits comfortably looking straight at the camera a look of almost predatory challenge in his eyes to anyone who dares lay claim on his prey. The woman's face is not part of the frame because she is not used as a person but is instead objectified as a thing to be attained by the strong males that would wear the fragrance.

Some students were able to embrace the wider context in which the advertisements were displayed:

> In Under Armour advert [figure 4.4], the slogan is targeting females' sports players and it discussed a very important issue in the society. It says a lot about it. Women all around the world get some negative comments about playing sports. Some countries don't really support women in this field because they are considering it a filed [field] for men only. Women be ignored and underrated very often and no one takes them seriously in sports. Nevertheless, society puts a lot of pressure on females to be perfect in everything. Yet this makes them feel uncomfortable sometimes.

Figure 4.4

Although the student above seems to have misread the point about being uncomfortable, as in its literal sense it refers to the sportswear the woman is dressed in, and her confidence in being a successful sportswoman, she has made a good point about how society relates to sportswomen. In analysing a Cadbury's chocolate bar advertisement that had the tagline "Move over Naomi, there's a new diva in town", another student discussed the backlash this advert received from the African American community because it was perceived to be racist, in terms of the reference to chocolate coloured skin. Both these students were able to contextualise their chosen advertisements with societal concerns regarding race and gender.

The latter student also reflected that:

> Women are often used provocatively in advertisements that target women which does not make sense because the companies are advertising the products to women. It is quite degrading and unnecessary, no matter the audience and does not need to be done in order to sell products.

It is also significant that the student felt confident in communicating a personal opinion. Another student found a more positive message in their advertisement:

> Also, the slogan in bold states "I will be more than a pretty face." This statement challenges society's norms and stereotypes that females should always limit their interests in stereotypical areas such as beauty, bakery and etc. Therefore, this message is very powerful because it empowers women since the advert is obviously aimed at women.

Assessment 2 also allowed students to select from two possible assignments. One assignment asked students to compare the opening chapter of a novel with the equivalent movie version with regard to different reading approaches required of the audience. Students were able to differentiate between the two:

> Despite the similarity in the theme and message of the film and the story, there are various variations in the presentation of ideas arising from the two mediums of communication. The use of suspense, narrations, flashbacks and soundtracks in acting used in the film tends to replace the means of vivid description and detailed explanations of different concepts covered in the first chapters of the book. Cinematography components appear to be the main aspect employed in the film for

> keeping viewers glued to the movie, while the story employs the style of explanation and themes revolving around the concept to ensure a certain message is communicated.

As can be seen from this excerpt, the student was able to provide a general comment on the different requirements placed on the reader for each of the genres of text, but did not provide examples demonstrating these points in their assignment. Another student did something similar in explaining the different settings:

> Comparing the settings, the book gives very little information in the being [sic] for the reader to picture as maybe the author tries to raise the sense of curiosity in the mind of the reader. Whereas the movies elaborate a lot of details such as the place, the bleakness in the atmosphere, the background which can give a lot of information of the scene and the slow music played in the background which gives life to the story and helps the viewers to connect with the movie and also provides historical and cultural context for characters.

This excerpt is rather general but the student clearly understands that the film director was able to utilise the different senses of the viewer in contributing to their reading of the text, i.e. sight and sound. Students were able to carry out the comparative analysis and account for why the film director had perhaps taken a different approach to the story than the author.

Assessment 3 was based on *Lord of the Flies*. At this point in the course, students demonstrated an awareness of what it means to be critically literate.

> Hence, the book helps in reading the world because it forms a summary of human nature and its dark side and delivers numerous views and ideas regarding universal social, psychological and political problems through symbolism, that require attention and analysis skills to be well-comprehended.

This student recognised that they had to build upon their previously learned analysis skills in order successfully to carry out an examination of the "social, psychological and political problems" posed in the text, which they did successfully. Another student gave an in-depth exploration of the issues of power that are central to the text:

> The composer of the text represented the characters in a particular way because he believes in social power relations which is the ability to control others behaviour or influence them, that power is often perceived as legitimate by the social structure. Therefore, each character in the novel represents different power system. For instance, Jack's character represents a dictatorial system since he was leading others with cruelty and brutality. Also, Ralph's character represents a democratic system since he believes in regulation and morality, further, he elected as a leader by the children.

This student shares their own perception of authoritative figures through using the author as their mouthpiece, and this opinion could well be a reflection of their own societal experience. Another student outlined how the text still has relevance today in this respect:

> The text is relevant to our world nowadays. People, countries, and politicians are always in the hunt for power and authority and the majority of these scenarios ended up with wars and a massive loss of innocent souls.

This student does not appear to have a positive outlook on those in positions of power. Yet another student highlighted the suffering of the everyday person:

> The children, called as the "Littluns" represent children that are very young, almost too young to bother caring about what will happen, the littluns are seen to represent adults that are being ruled and have no authority or the power to say anything, they just go by their day not thinking about what their rulers have in mind for them.

Adults are seen here as being oppressed, not having a voice and blindly succumbing to those that rule over them. Again, the question has to be asked; is this how the student views adults in their own society? Other students focused on the gaps and silences within the text:

> There were also some Gaps and Silences in the novel which brings me to characters that really seem to not have a voice in the novel. Simon, the littluns and Piggy were the ones being left out, maybe because they weren't of importance to the author to possibly interrogate the story in a better way.

Although these characters speak in the text, it has been noted that they cannot speak up for themselves. The silence has been identified, but the student has not been able to account for it. This was also evident in the work of another student

and could have been a result of the students just beginning their critical literacy analysis:

> The text has a lot of gaps and silences such as their arrival to the island or their plane crash or the missing pilot remains mysterious and that the littluns are not given much power of speech. The text is showing us how would the world be with no rules and that if a group of small boys can turn barbaric and turn everything to chaos, what will it be like if everyone having heavy weapons do [sic] if they were in their place.

This student could be referring to nuclear missiles in their reference to "heavy weapons." Another noted absence in the text was that of women and adults in the text. Students asked questions in their assignments like: "why all the characters are boys?" [sic] and "the adults (the pilot, Piggy's aunt and the officer who rescued them) were mentioned briefly but not given a voice…but the question is why were they not given a voice?" but once again, they were unable to speculate in response to these questions.

Assessment 4 was a reflection on the PBL project, which was a culmination of the skills learned on the course. Although evidence from this assessment has been used already in different sections of this chapter, I would like to highlight the learning that took place from the student perspective. Students appeared to respond positively to the course overall, and were able to apply their learning from the course to their chosen PBL project.

> Reading and understanding texts is something attractive specially [sic] if the hidden messages is understood carefully and what is being said is acknowledged in the mind in the correct format.

The process of critical reading was enjoyed, and the importance of reading between the lines and considering thoroughly the words of the author has been understood. Another student provided further detail:

> I learned in this course to identify the purpose of a text. This helps me read from a more relevant perspective. Another thing I have learned is identifying the authors [sic] point of view, and determining when a text was written. By knowing when a text was written, I could learn more about why it is written in a certain way.

Understanding the reason for reading, identifying the author's intention and contextualising the text are all central components of being critically literate. Considering texts from multiple perspectives was also highlighted:

> Having to analyse different kind of texts throughout the course I now realise that every person has his or her own way of looking into the world and also taking every person's point of view in consideration when every [sic] trying to figure out a text.

The PBL question that was the most popular was the sourcing of a fake news article and explaining what was problematic with it.

> The most important and useful thing related to the PBL project is how we can define and know the fake article, And [sic] this knowledge was very fun and excited to be learn [sic] in this course, because it something we face every day and most of the people do not bother them self to search about it to make sure it is true, they just start to sharing and reposting it. Some articles could be dangerous in order it affect people, communities and religions. So they must consider these things before posting any news especially the series [sic] once [sic].

Although this excerpt was a pertinent response to the question, the relatively general nature of it illustrates the student's hesitation to pass comment on the specific article under discussion (an article on the American presidential election of 2016). Another student commented that:

> The topic I picked was very mixed in that it could have happened and at the same time it seemed quite fake...An aspect that I found interesting was the sheer amount of fake news that is available online. People seep [seem] to not care about the consequences of publishing false information that may harm societies and entire people groups.

Again, the dangers of distributing fake news have been clearly understood, as has the importance of being able to distinguish between what is true and what is not.

This section aimed to chart the progress of students from basic analysis to a more critically literate approach to reading texts. As in any class, the success rates varied among students, but the majority of students were successful in achieving both analysis and critical literacy, to some extent.

Conclusion

This is not an exhaustive account of the findings from my action research project. Instead, the key findings have been outlined. These emerged from pre- and post-course survey questionnaires with the students, the course materials, student classwork and assessments, pre- and post-course interviews with Susan, my own class observations, my reflective journal and weekly team meetings with Susan. Key findings were that careful selection of texts was imperative to the success of the course, as a result of the teaching context. The use of a wide variety of genres of text was well-received by students. Challenges and achievements were documented from the perspectives of students and tutors. The design of the course was an on-going process, influenced by the student responses in the pre-course survey questionnaire and their abilities during the course, and Susan's and my own interactions with our classes. Finally, what students' claimed to know versus what work they were capable of producing (in terms of analysis and critical literacy) was of particular interest to this study.

The originality of this research project was significant. The findings make an original contribution to the literature. In addition to a gap which has been identified in the published literature regarding the teaching of critical literacy in the GCC countries, another gap that was identified was how to teach critical literacy when students have not had experience of traditional literary and linguistic analysis. This is where the design of the course was crucial to the findings. The key question that was explored was how the students themselves engaged with and reacted to the texts that were selected. This leads to implications for policy that will be discussed in the next chapter, centring on whether the course might provide a model that may be useful to other practitioners or researchers in a similar geographical context. The Discussion chapter will also succinctly answer the research questions and provide more detailed insights into some of the key findings.

Chapter 5

Discussion Chapter

Introduction

The action research project that was undertaken unearthed a number of key findings, as identified in the previous chapter. The purpose of this chapter is to highlight what these key findings mean, and how they answer the research questions. The research questions were:

1) How can one foster critical literacy in students where there are distinct constraints on the freedom of expression and action?
2) To what extent do student and teacher perceptions of critical literacy change throughout the taught course?
3) In what ways, and to what degree, was the course successful in teaching analytical and critical reading?

The research questions are answered in separate sections of this chapter, beginning with how Susan and I were able to teach critical literacy in a country where there are distinct constraints on the freedom of expression and action. The discussion then moves to how students' and teachers' perceptions of critical literacy changed throughout the course. Finally, the ways in which the course was successful in teaching analytical reading and critical literacy is examined. References will be made throughout to research that was presented in the literature review, showing the connections in my research to prior research. The chapter also highlights the unique contribution that my research is making to current research. However, it is important, in addition, to discuss the limitations of my research, as well as to suggest areas for future research.

Constraints on the Freedom of Expression and Action in Bahrain

Because of the restrictions on freedom of expression and action in Bahrain, and the consequences associated with breaching these, the teaching of critical

literacy had its challenges. However, these were not wholly unexpected, despite there being little mention of teaching critical literacy in more challenging environments in the literature. The study by Abednia and Izadinia (2013) in Tehran (cited previously in the literature review), highlighted the culture of fear that promotes silence and neutrality, rather than criticality in thought, in countries that have experienced repression. This was not a finding that was supported through my own study, despite the challenges that were faced, as my students did demonstrate criticality in thought throughout my course. There could be a number of reasons for this, for example, the more liberal nature of Bahrain compared to some other surrounding countries – the rights of women, the democratic election of council representatives, and the existence of the entertainment industry.

There could be people who argue that social action does not have to be political, or be of a threatening nature. But this is an appropriate point at which to be reminded of the scenario I discussed previously where students were expelled because they were perceived to have critiqued the local bus system. This demonstrates that context *is* significant. Having a strong awareness of the culture was important at each stage of my research. It was never my goal to cause offence to my students by presenting inappropriate material or to be disrespectful to Bahrain. I think my extensive experience of living and working in the GCC (20 years in total) helped significantly with this. It should be noted here that there was the one student who, as discussed in the findings chapter, expressed that they thought we had not prepared a suitable course given the host country and who appeared to be quite offended by the nature of the course. This was never my intention, but this feedback illustrated how delicate the situation was within which we were working.

Another question that has to be posed when teaching critical literacy is whether it is enough to start off with drawing students' attention to issues, for example race and gender issues, that are playing out in the wider world. Advocates for critical literacy, such as Janks (2014), would probably argue not. I would be

more inclined to say that such issues should be addressed, especially with the advent of higher education becoming so much more international. The University of Salford (Manchester) has been the latest university to establish a satellite campus in Bahrain. Similar campuses exist in Dubai, e.g. Heriot Watt University and the University of Wollongong (Australia). Their degrees are graded according to the benchmarks of western education systems. One central aim of teaching critical literacy is to make students more academically successful, and to take part in extra-curricular activities, e.g. student councils and committees. I empowered students because by the end of the course they were able to react and respond critically to texts (this applies to students who passed the course). They were able to reposition themselves as readers, rather than passively accepting what was presented to them. I think that is important to emphasise here that critical literacy has to be adapted for different contexts. It is not a 'one size fits all' approach.

As I was developing the course, I thought about what the biggest problem was that students faced at the Institution. It was the issue of parking – there are not nearly enough parking spaces for the number of students. This causes frustration among the student body and often results in students arriving late to class because they cannot find a parking space. Most people drive in Bahrain as the country has a very limited public transport network. I considered initiating a project that would require students to take action in response to this problem. However, I stopped myself in this line of thought as I was worried about how this might be perceived by the Institution and how external bodies may have reacted if they heard about it. However, the lack of parking spaces for students was discussed in my class, in relation to the subject of 'Power'. I recorded in my journal that students noted the hierarchy between top management having assigned car parking spaces, and other staff having assigned car parking lots near to the main building, which have capacity enough for all staff, while students struggle with a car parking lot on the edge of the campus that cannot accommodate many of them at most times throughout the day. This discussion that I was engaged in with my students highlights the dilemma between what

students were perceptive to versus my reluctance to evidence their complaints through projects that could then be misinterpreted by others.

The recent case (2018) of the academic Michael Hedges, a PhD student at the University of Durham, who was arrested before his departure from Dubai airport on charges of spying for the British government, in May 2018, is sobering. He maintained that he was conducting research for his thesis on security. Although he was pardoned in November 2018, he was initially charged, found guilty and jailed for life. This demonstrates how careful one has to be when conducting research outside of one's home country, and also how dangerous it can be if that research is misunderstood abroad.

There was no inclusion on the course of what could be considered more controversial texts, as was noted by a student whom I quoted in the Findings chapter. I think students would have enjoyed the experience of being challenged in this way but they did not express frustration that such texts were not included. They had been educated in an educational environment that had moulded them in a certain way. They were not used to asking questions and challenging texts so when Susan and I had to stop them mid-flow, so to speak, or cut-off discussions, they were respectful of that. They knew inherently the types of discussions we could and could not have and they were very cognisant of that. They never challenged either Susan or me on the matter of why they could not continue to discuss a certain subject. The fact that the students would attempt to discuss subjects in depth and really explore them fully, for example censorship of the media when we were discussing fake news demonstrated their willingness and confidence in communicating their personal viewpoints and opinions. This was contrasted with the self-censorship that the students exercised when selecting the advertisements to analyse for the first question of the first assessment at the beginning of the course. The focus was on different gender constructs and I understand fully why students were interested in choosing advertisements that may have been regarded as inappropriate to their culture, but shied away from them. This meant that this assessment question

was not as successful as it otherwise might have been. It raised an interesting point for me however, because if certain types of text exist, and we are being exposed to them, (for example, through the internet), but we can't acknowledge them, with whom does the power lie? In addition to this, if certain things cannot be said, it may not be possible to meet certain criteria for criticality.

The methodological decision to keep the identities of students completely anonymous in the survey questionnaires was a complicated one, as it had implications for the analysis of my findings. But this decision was taken for the protection of my students, based on past happenings, such as those in 2011 recounted in the Introduction. I genuinely do not believe that in the current climate in Bahrain that any of our students would face repercussions for expressing their personal viewpoints on my course and its contents, but in my letter of informed consent, I guaranteed anonymity and I felt that it was my duty as the researcher to honour this. This entailed the distinct limitation that I could not compare individual students' pre-course survey responses with their post-course survey responses. However, I would take the same approach were I doing this project again, as sound ethical behaviour was central to my research.

How Critical Literacy is Presented in the Literature

-Overview

Within the literature, critical literacy research is usually situated in a western context. It is in countries such as Australia, South Africa and Canada that practitioners have really pushed to have critical literacy at the forefront of their curricula. There are some examples of critical literacy being incorporated into lessons in Asia. This is usually as an add-on to a language class when practised in the context of higher educational institutions. The focus of critical literacy is on social change and empowering students and critical pedagogy informs the teaching approaches. There are risks associated with teaching critical literacy however and the current published literature on critical literacy has not dealt

with this adequately in the past, especially in more challenging geographical and cultural contexts. This is part of my contribution to the literature.

In teaching critical literacy as part of my course, the key foci areas for students were: gaps and silences; power and interest; multiple perspectives, and deconstructing and reconstructing texts. It could be argued that Susan and I did not teach critical literacy to its fullest extent. This is because it is often political and also promotes social change. We were unable to align ourselves with this aspect of critical literacy for reasons previously discussed. This was limiting but unfortunately this was part of the sacrifice of teaching critical literacy in this context. This is something other practitioners need to be aware of if they are considering teaching critical literacy in similar geographical contexts. But I do not think that this limitation is a reason for practitioners to avoid the teaching of critical literacy. It is quite possible to situate texts in a more global context, and place emphasis on more international issues, rather than local ones.

This became challenging at times, as students admitted in the pre-course survey questionnaire that the majority of them rarely read the news, and thus had had very limited exposure to some of the topics and text types that could have otherwise been discussed much more fully in class. An example of this was when we were analysing picture books, specifically *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan. I had hoped that reading about the plight of an immigrant venturing to a foreign land would lead to a discussion on the refugee crisis. Similarly, *The Red Tree* by Shaun Tan offered opportunities for a dialogue on mental health, which is largely stigmatized here in Bahrain. Although words like 'depression' did emerge in the group discussions, these were not pursued as serious societal issues. This highlighted for Susan and me the limitations that exist when there is a very low baseline of knowledge of and exposure to certain current global issues, and as a result, a lack of 'hooks' for productive discussion. This meant that part of our role centred on first bringing about some sort of global awareness to students. A particularly insightful teaching moment for me was when I asked students how they thought they, as young Muslims, might be

stereotyped by Westerners living in the UK or America. The first thing that they all agreed on was Westerners thought all Arabs were rich. In this instance, I noticed that they identified first and foremost as Arabs, rather than Muslims, which was contrary to my expectations. I thought about the sensationalist headlines that often appear in tabloid newspapers in the UK, detailing stories of terrorists, suicide bombers and incredibly strict religious practices, such as forced arranged marriages and 'honour' killings. It was not until the fifth response that one student said: "They think we would be terrorists." I had expected this to come up much earlier.

Issues that Arose when Teaching Critical Literacy in this Context

The challenges of text selection were the central issues that arose in teaching critical literacy in Bahrain. There were a number of reasons for this, some of which have already been outlined in the discussion of the constraints on the freedom of expression and action. In terms of making changes to the course were it to run again in the future, I am still unsure as to whether *Lord of the Flies* would be the novel which I would use again on this course. A few students suggested this was a change that they would like to see happen in the course in the future. I recorded in my reflective journal that students had told me how boring they found the text, and how difficult the language was to understand. This could have been because of their inexperience of reading novels, or the storyline itself. A lot of class time was spent on basic comprehension, which supports the study of Huh (2016), who found that when basic comprehension breaks down, it is very difficult to move onto critical literacy. For me, this highlighted the lack of attention that is given in the literature on critical literacy on the importance of first ensuring students have analytical skills. The assessment for *Lord of the Flies* required students to produce an advertisement for the novel. Most students interpreted this as a reconstruction of the book cover. Perhaps this is because it was easier to do, but regardless, they were demonstrating their use and understanding of the power of visual signs and signifiers that had been established with the first topic of study (advertisements) and built upon when looking at novel to film adaptions.

Through their visual reconstruction, they were able to explain successfully the tenet(s) of critical literacy that they wanted their readers' attention to be focused on. There was therefore a clash between students' face-to-face verbal responses to the text (that it was boring and difficult to understand), and the success of the assessment. The implications of this were that the style of the assessment was accessible to students. Only a few students struggled to write a justification for their advert from a critical literacy perspective.

The use of international texts could have meant that students were less engaged than they could have been otherwise. However, it is important to state here that this is not a critique of the student cohorts, because overall both Susan and I reported good levels of engagement with the course. The focus here is that there is always room for improvement. Engagement could have been affected as students were not always familiar with the text's context. Janks, for example, in her book '*Doing Critical Literacy*' (2014), has contextualised some material within a South African perspective, as this is where she works. In line with Janks's practice, I worked to include a regional text in my course with which my students would likely be more familiar. I incorporated the animated cartoon *Freej*, which was a popular text in the region a number of years ago. Despite extensive research, I was not able to find other suitable regional texts. *The Kite Runner* and *Girls of Riyadh* were both considered as potential texts, and although widely available in Bahrain, I felt that there were themes in each that we would not have been afforded the opportunity to explore. *Girls of Riyadh* particularly could have led to a perceived critique of the host culture as the two countries of Saudi and Bahrain enjoy very close relations and the text is banned in Saudi Arabia.

I also encountered problems in preparing materials on fake news. After much deliberation, I focused on the different types of fake news and how it spreads. I sourced a TED talk on this topic, by Noah Tavlin, discussing how false news can spread. We stayed away from political examples that involved Donald Trump, although this did come up in both classes during class discussion. At the point of teaching, there was a movement in the UK where Facebook had taken out

advertisements in newspapers making readers aware of fake news. These included a list of ten things to be aware of when deciding the truth of an article. I sourced the BBC news article that discussed Facebook's ten steps for spotting fake news and we read this at the end of the session, comparing it to the students' own list. This proved to be an incredibly insightful lesson for students and the task, (writing a check list for elementary school children on identifying fake news), revealed their awareness of not only how to spot fake news, but why it was increasingly important to do so. This engaged the students' own critical functioning. Students revealed that they had not previously given much thought to how they might be contributing personally to the spread of fake news, especially through social media channels, and largely assumed everything they were reading was true. This was not an issue confined to this culture but a general problem, seen for example in the UK, as is emphasised by Facebook's publishing of advertisements in *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph* on how to identify fake news.

Class discussions having to be 'shut down' prematurely was another issue of which Susan and I were acutely aware. This was not unexpected, as it was something that we had discussed during the pre-course interview as probably likely to happen. Although it was unfortunate that this happened, there was also a more positive reflection to be made, and that was that it highlighted students' willingness to engage in a more critical dialogue than the context would allow. Although it was disappointing for Susan and me to have to end some discussions abruptly, it was encouraging that students felt comfortable pursuing such topics to the extent that they did. An example of this was when we were discussing gender issues with regard to the *Freej* episode *Jameela*. This situation also brings into focus the qualities required of a teacher in teaching critical literacy in similar contexts. An extended discussion of this will take place at a later point in this chapter.

It could be argued that Susan and I were being too cautious as facilitators. However, I do not think this was the case. Students were not perturbed when we had to say "we can't talk about this" or "we can't go any further with this."

They did not challenge us. In Susan's words "they knew". But then how can we say that we were empowering students? Some could argue that we were in a way silencing their voices, which is clearly the complete opposite of what making students critically literate entails. This is an important point for consideration. It points back to the dilemma of the teaching context and what can realistically be achieved under the constraints of freedom of expression and action in Bahrain.

Laying the Foundations for Teaching Critical Literacy

Analytical skills required of students

The students had had very limited experience of being taught analytical skills prior to the course. As a result, we had to teach these first. This is one reason that informed my decision to design an entire 16-week course, rather than attempt to incorporate critical literacy into the already established English language course. This incorporation is usually the approach taken to critical literacy in higher education according to the research literature, especially across Asia. Because my institution offers an Electives programme, (which allows tutors to design courses on topics of their choice in order to provide students with some insight into areas of study that they would not otherwise gain from the sometimes limited nature of their chosen degree courses), I was afforded the opportunity to explore fully critical literacy at work in the classroom in its own right. Teaching analytical skills to the students took time, but this was the basis of, and preparation for, the important critical literacy teaching that came later.

Before one can be critically literate, they have to be able to analyse a text. The reader first has to be able to examine the text methodically before they can 'read' what is missing or only implied. They have to be able to decipher the author's intended perspective before they can view the text from other perspectives. They have to be able to identify the intended audience before they can establish whose voices are being prioritised, and why. Through analysis, the reader can

understand and interpret meaning. This enables the reader to relate to the text, linking their own experiences and assumptions to it in order to contextualise it. This is not an exhaustive list of what is required of the reader, but highlights some of the things that readers have to be able to do. Analysis is a skill that applies to everything else students do, and can lead to critical appreciation. In helping students to become critically literate, we build on their analysis skills. The current literature on critical literacy has a tendency to assume that students already have analytical skills in place. However, my findings demonstrated that this may not always have been the case in my teaching context. I would suggest that in any context where critical literacy is introduced, attention needs to be given to this matter.

It is important to consider why students were lacking key analytical skills as it may be surprising that students could progress so far through their education without these. The style of their education, which centres around memorisation and rote learning, is one factor. The government school system is a very teacher-centred environment. In their testing of English, government English language reading exams focus on basic comprehension of a short written script. Also, their upbringing in general has to be considered. Very traditional lifestyles at home require most children to be subservient. This is a cultural point and is largely about respect for their elders, (i.e. their parents and the wider community). Obedience is valued highly. Some Bahraini youngsters are therefore not given the opportunity to speak their own minds, and would be reprimanded for doing so in the home and in society. The focus is on doing what one is told to do, and this applies to thinking in the classroom. This was illustrated clearly in the pre-course survey when students overwhelmingly answered that if they did not know the meaning of something, they would ask someone (usually a family member or teacher), rather than find out/think for themselves.

Both classes of students faced difficulties as the course began. There was apprehension regarding engagement in tasks and class discussions. Again, this was anticipated. This cannot all be attributed to the nature of the course

however, as there were other factors at play, such as teachers they had not necessarily encountered before and new classmates. We overcame these difficulties in a number of ways. Students were encouraged to explore texts in small groups, (picture books and fairy tales). This enabled them to gauge each other's reactions and responses without the intimidation that talking in front of a whole class can bring. We focused on guiding them through their small group discussions by providing questions to scaffold their analysis. We also emphasized that there was not one 'correct' answer that we were looking for. Active participation was encouraged and we probed what started off as their 'surface' observations to bring more depth to the discussion. We used positive reinforcement through our use of language, for example saying: "Yes, well done, that's insightful…what about if you considered…?" There was strong scaffolding surrounding analytical reading in the opening weeks of the course. This was because it quickly became apparent that students were not used to being encouraged to think for themselves. They were also apprehensive about engaging in their first analysis task (of advertisements) in the second week, demonstrating to both Susan and me that this was an area of study with which they were largely unfamiliar. This highlighted the fact that our students had very limited analytical skills.

The different genres of text were strategically placed in terms of accessibility. I did not want students to be overwhelmed by the content of the texts. We started with print advertisements because students had indicated in their pre-course survey questionnaire that they used social media and the internet daily or almost daily. Advertisements appear on almost all websites, as well as on billboards along highways and in malls, and in magazines, although many students said they never or almost never read them. Students would have been exposed to a multitude of advertisements in their daily lives and it therefore made sense to start with texts with which they were most familiar. I made the decision to analyse only print advertisements rather than also including multimedia advertisements because an additional set of skills is needed to analyse moving images. I thought that it would be more beneficial to leave this

to a later point in the course (novel to film adaptions and visual literacies). Students also said they had used picture books to learn how to read in both Arabic and English, so this was the second genre we introduced. Students were more confident engaging in the analysis of picture books with their peers than they were with the advertisements. This could have been because the continued focus was on reading the images, rather than language, especially in the case of the Shaun Tan texts. The few students who were able to say what it meant to analyse a text prior to the course concentrated their explanations around the language that was used. They had not anticipated that images could also be read. This meant that I had challenged their preconceptions of both what constituted a text and what it meant to 'read' right at the beginning of the course. This was important because I wanted to subvert their expectations from the start, as by doing so I was hoping I would meet less resistance when teaching critical literacy. Resistance was an area highlighted in the literature by some practitioners who introduced critical literacy into their classrooms (Petrone et al, 2012). Thus the order in which texts were introduced was of key significance.

Critical Literacy in Language Courses

I think that it is a very large problem that language proficiency tests do not require students to be critically literate. It is an undervalued skillset and unfortunately too many language teachers teach to the exam. In my own experience, it is also what some students expect. Most students are exam focused and thus struggle to understand the value of anything deemed unrelated to the exam. This is a predicament in which language teachers who want to incorporate critical literacy into their curriculum could find themselves. As an example, the Foundation language course at my Institution recently introduced the British Council's APTIS as the benchmark for deciding which students pass from the Foundation (pre-degree) course to their undergraduate degree. This test has five components: reading; writing; listening; speaking; and grammar and vocabulary. The reading section asks students to organise sentences in order to make a coherent story, and match paragraph headings to

their paragraphs. Other proficiency tests, such IELTS, also only focus on basic comprehension in their reading components of exams. I think this sends out the wrong message to Language teachers because it suggests that understanding the surface meaning of the text suffices to deem a student to be literate. It thus becomes challenging to convince language departments to integrate critical literacy into their courses.

Furthermore, I did not think that including a few isolated lessons on critical literacy would result in any real, meaningful learning for the students, which was the approach that was proposed to me when I first discussed the possibility of working to integrate critical literacy into the already established language course. As Vasquez (2014) has advocated, critical literacy is a framework through which we approach texts, and this approach takes a lot of practice before it becomes a habit for the reader. This is what motivated me to write my own course. I feel strongly that English language proficiency tests, which are often pre-requisites for admission to university courses, need to be adapted to include a component in the reading section on critical literacy. This is because, in my experience, 'washback' is commonplace in language courses. 'Washback' refers to testing dictating what is taught in the classroom (Alderson & Wall, 1993). Perhaps this is difficult though because native speakers are not necessarily critically literate. Different western countries refer to critical literacy in their educational policy documents, as discussed in the literature review. This is not always taught as part of the mainstream curriculum though, as teachers again lack sufficient training in this area.

I also expected to face some student resistance to what was for the students a new way of learning, in terms of having to think for themselves, rather than being told what to think, and having to read beyond the basic comprehension of a text. However, neither Susan nor I experienced this in our classrooms. We were both very surprised to read the post-course survey questionnaire answers of the one student who said they were offended by the course, as this was not made obvious during class. I would have struggled to identify this student had I tried. I think the teaching techniques that we used helped students to adapt as

well - working in groups provided security as opposed to individual work. It also afforded them the opportunity to learn from each other. Susan and I were both very open to giving the students opportunities to practise analysis early on in the course. We both frequently used open-ended questions to encourage student participation and engagement. We did not have set answers in our heads that we expected the students to come up with, in order for their analysis to be deemed to be correct. This contributed to the sharing of power in the classroom between the teacher and students. We encouraged their own readings and interpretations of texts, thus helping to encourage and foster independent thinking.

Attributes of the Teacher

The personal qualities required of a teacher introducing critical literacy in this context were significant. MacFarlane (2009) discusses the virtues which are required of a researcher, the first two being courage and respectfulness. Although Susan was not a researcher, I think these virtues also applied to her as a practitioner, as she had to demonstrate both when participating in the research. MacFarlane states that courage is required when a topic could be considered socially or politically controversial. His view is that "like all virtues, courage is a mean between extremes" (58). He characterises the extremes as cowardice and recklessness. I believe that Susan and I were walking a kind of tight-rope, for example when ensuring that class discussions did not take a 'wrong turn'. We also required courage in pursuing the curriculum that I had prepared, in terms of navigating what in some cases could have been labelled as challenging topics, such as fake news. I did not face any resistance from Susan. I think that part of this was because she had chosen to teach this course, having been briefed on it beforehand and on the project as a whole. Overall, she was enthusiastic and self-motivated. She also contributed to the course, e.g. selecting the TED talk on *'The Dangers of a Single Story'*. She did not become stressed, because she was an experienced teacher and was familiar with both the institution and the country. Susan was a well-respected member of staff, by both faculty and students, and was readily able to gain the trust of her students, as

was I. This brings me to MacFarlane's second virtue of respectfulness. I have already discussed this in the Methodology chapter in terms of respecting research participants, but I think that it is worth drawing attention to again here. The creation of 'safe' teaching and learning spaces by Susan and me was crucial in enabling me to answer my research questions and demonstrated a respectfulness towards our students. It was also about sharing power in the classroom, through giving students a platform from which to voice their own views.

Changing Perceptions of Critical Literacy

Student perceptions

Prior to the course, students had a limited understanding of analysis and almost no understanding of critical literacy. They had little understanding of the importance of these skills. However, by the end of the course, most students saw the value in their newly acquired reading skills. There was also recognition of transfer of knowledge to other courses, even though this was minimal in some cases (for example, one student wrote that, "I learned teamwork through working with others and this will help me to complete group projects in my degree.").

I think students' perceptions changed during the course largely because they initially thought that it would follow the conventions of a basic literature course. Additionally, Susan and I were both aware of the students' tendency to sign up for whatever Elective could fit between their core classes, a decision that was motivated by requiring the Elective credits rather than an interest in the subject. It became apparent through the pre-course questionnaire that a number of students thought the course would consist solely of reading novels, focusing only on comprehension and analysis of key themes. As the course progressed, however, they were able to make the connection between what they were learning in class and their daily lives. They also became more comfortable and confident asking questions of the texts, and pursuing a more critical line of enquiry.

I also observed that by the end of the course, students were much more empowered as readers. By this I mean that they were able to respond to and challenge the dominant messages of particular texts, rather than simply accepting them at face value. Through identifying gaps and silences in texts, students were able to discuss who had not been given a voice and why. Cultural ideologies were also taken into account, which contributed to viewing the text from multiple perspectives. Through these practices, students were able to make sense of the information that was being presented to them in a variety of different forms. They became more active readers. This served to empower them because they were not allowing themselves to be positioned by the text creator. Empowerment is a central concept of critical literacy and seeing this develop in my students convinced me that they were in fact becoming critically literate, despite the absence of them instigating social change. This was a key change in how I perceived critical literacy because prior to the course I had read in the literature that taking action was key (Janks, 2014; Freire, 1968), but as I was writing the course I realised that critical literacy has many different layers. As I was teaching the course, I became more aware that making a social change was not an inherent part of my students becoming critically literate. This has implications for the teaching of critical literacy in countries that are less democratic than some other countries.

Teacher perceptions

Prior to the course, Susan did not appear to have much explicitly articulated understanding of the tenets of critical literacy, but was able to discuss with me the importance of students having strong analytical skills. She demonstrated implicit knowledge however in sharing some of her practices in her previous teaching on a History Elective. In the pre-course interview, she told me how she encouraged students to consider issues from different perspectives through presenting a variety of sources on a subject, each from a different viewpoint. It was interesting to me that such implicit knowledge came from teaching on another Elective, as opposed to the Academic English course. Upon beginning

the teaching of the critical literacy Elective, Susan was surprised by how engaged and interested her students were.

Susan did not see where the teaching of analysis ended and the teaching of critical literacy began. This suggests that there was a seamless transition and I think this emphasises how successfully I was able to build on the analytical skills that we taught the students when my designing of the curriculum. It also emphasises the extent to which critical literacy rests upon possessing and calling upon analytical skills.

Post-course, Susan said she did not see how any aspect of the course could be used in her English language course. This inability to incorporate any of the content/activities was key. It is a significant insight because even after teaching the course with me, and seeing its inherent value in terms of what it taught students, she still did not think that critical literacy could have space in the English course on which she also teaches. This is something I feel that having trained as a TESOL teacher, I will be battling continuously with colleagues and other practitioners. It appears to be an area of contention. I think reading is about more than just baseline comprehension and that critical literacy should be a priority in the language classroom, and even more so when students have not been taught this in their native language. The latter point is made despite the fact that it can be considerably more challenging to do so in a second language.

When I first had the idea for this action research project, I knew that there would be two major challenges; first, claiming that I had taught critical literacy without my students having initiated any social change or taken any social action as a result of their learning; and second, the issue of selecting appropriate texts that would allow for in-depth analysis and, later, adopting a critical literacy approach, while ensuring that they did not cause offence to students. The latter point has already been discussed at length. Aside from the teaching of fake news, having given careful thought and consideration to the selection and preparation of course materials, it was not as challenging as I had anticipated to

source appropriate texts. In terms of teaching a more limited version of critical literacy, I do not think this impacted adversely on my students' understanding of what it meant to be critically literate. They showed awareness of the societal context but were relatively open in their verbal contributions to both Susan and me.

Because I had taught for some years in the Institution, I was aware that the students enrolling on my course would have limited analytical skills. I planned the curriculum knowing that the first half of the course would be dedicated to the analysis of texts. However, I was also acutely aware as I was teaching that critical pedagogies were influencing me throughout. This meant that although at the beginning of the course I was teaching analysis, I was also priming students for the later teaching of critical literacy by posing more introductory level critical questioning and discussion. I think this may be the reason Susan did not see a clear break between the teaching of analysis and that of critical literacy.

Text types and the positioning of texts also had a significant impact on both teacher and student perceptions of the course, and how they changed over time. I think that when we were practising analysis, some of the texts were quite far removed from those students' lives, although these texts were accessible to them, in terms of readability. The positive aspect of this was that in the opening weeks of the course, the students' perceptions of what constituted a text were challenged, and they showed interest and engagement in the light of this. I do not think at this early stage however, that they realised the full importance of analysis, or why they had to do it. This was reflected in their initial reluctance to contribute to group analysis tasks or to whole class discussions. They also gave short written answers where these were required, which showed a lack of follow-through. However, as the course continued, students came to understand the relevance of analysis and critical literacy to their everyday lives. This was most obvious when we were studying fake news, and the majority of students admitted that they gave very little thought to the source and motivation of the producers of articles that they read on social media, before re-posting or forwarding them on to their friends. Another significant moment was when

students were establishing their identity positions (through producing a mind-map of their identities according to social categories and roles, and communities (Janks, 2014)) and what factors influenced their interpretations of texts.

There were key moments of change throughout the course. The most significant changes that came through for Susan and me were: widening cultural perspectives (fairytales); the importance of considering the whole text, for example, reading beyond the language and interpreting visual signs and signifiers (started with *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*); and awareness of the power of the media in shaping perceptions (fake news).

These were the key moments of change for Susan and me; but we both agreed that overall we witnessed a gradual development of students' skills from analysis to critical literacy. Each topic built upon the last, which enabled students the opportunity to become more confident readers, in terms of how they navigated texts, and learned to engage actively with them. Some very lively class discussions took place throughout the course, especially as students became more comfortable voicing their views and engaging in debate with their peers. Two memorable moments were when we were conversing about *Lord of the Flies.* My class explored how the story may have been different if the boys had instead been a group of girls, while Susan's class staged a debate on the motion 'This house believes that Piggy should be the leader', later discussing how events may have unfolded differently if Piggy had been the leader instead of Ralph.

Success of the Course in Teaching the Students Analytical Skills and Critical Literacy

The findings demonstrate that the course was successful in teaching the student's analytical skills and critical literacy. The small number of students who failed the course largely did so because they did not submit the final assignment – they had effectively dropped out of the course. Only one student failed the course as a result of failing one of the assessments. This student had

received extensive feedback on assessment 3 but resubmitted the assessment with only minor changes and this was not enough to receive a passing mark.

However, student success in analysis and critical literacy was not just evident from their assessments. Students became more confident as the course progressed in terms of their participation in whole class and group discussions, in addition to in their written tasks and assignments. They were more willing to share their thoughts and opinions and also to challenge each other's views. Maintaining a high level of student engagement throughout the duration of the 16-week course was also indicative of its success.

What I cannot be sure of is the extent to which the students took this learning and applied it in other contexts once the course was completed. For example, did they still think twice before re-posting articles on social media, considering whether they may or may not be fake news? Some said that they recognised the transferability of their skills to their other subjects but I cannot know if this actually happened the following semester.

Changes to a Future Course and its Delivery Following Evaluation of the Course

Although the course ran successfully overall, there are some changes that I would make to a future teaching of the course. I would like to change *Lord of the Flies* to a different novel, but the challenge is finding another suitable text to replace it.

In future, I would remove the PBL project as there was not enough time at the end of the course for this to be implemented properly. This would have implications for the final assessment, which required students to write a reflection on their PBL project. I would rewrite this assessment to ask students to reflect on their learning across the course. Questions for them to consider would include: what does critical literacy mean to you? What was the most significant learning moment for you during this course and why? I think that reflecting on the whole course would be more meaningful for students in terms

of providing them with the opportunity to express their thoughts and would also serve as a useful evaluation tool for future teaching. I was able to collect this information through the post-course survey questionnaire but a future course would probably not utilise this.

Implications for Teachers

Teachers in higher education in Bahrain have to be aware that some high school students are entering their institutions with very limited analytical skills. I say some because it depends on what school system the students went through. My students largely went through the Bahraini education system rather than the British or American systems, but this will not be the case for all higher educational institutes in the country. Teachers in the public school system have a responsibility to teach these skills to their students and I advocate that they should be doing so.

Implications for Policy Makers

Policy makers need to consider incorporating analysis and critical literacy skills into the education curriculum across all levels. This could be integrated into the student's English language lessons, which are a compulsory part of the curriculum for all school-aged children. It has to be recognised that analysis and critical literacy are key skills in which students need to be competent so that they can take control of the information that is being presented to them through various textual forms. Rewriting policy takes time, so for the immediate future, higher education institutions need to be aware that some students are significantly lacking in analytical and critical literacy skills. They should ensure that they have classes in place that teach these skills.

Implications for Student Teacher Education

The findings from this action research project have illustrated that students are graduating from high school and entering higher education with limited analytical skills and almost no critical literacy skills. This is despite the fact that the curriculum document states that students will become critical readers

through grades 10-12. Part of being able to achieve this is ensuring that student teachers are trained to know what is meant by the term 'critical reader' and how to bring students to this point. This means making changes to teacher training curricula. Until this happens, it falls to higher education practitioners to bridge this gap. In-service training is necessary for educators to put systems in place that support students in first learning analysis and then critical literacy, rather than assuming that they already know how to analyse texts. There needs to be a focus on critical literacy, in terms of what it encompasses and why it is important for students to become experienced in this way of thinking. This could be achieved through offering blended learning courses that could form part of the professional development of the practitioner.

Training teachers is another potential starting point. If critical literacy has not featured in their teacher-training course, then how can they know what they do not know? It was not until I enrolled on my MSc TESOL course that I was introduced to critical literacy, and came to understand the importance of including it in my own teaching. This was five years into my teaching career.

Limitations of the Study

Data collection

A limitation of this study is that my data collection did not include interviews with students or focus group interviews. Had I included either form of interviewing, this would have given students the opportunity to expand and build on some of their responses in the questionnaires. It would have also given me the opportunity to ask additional questions to allow them to build on their responses in the questionnaire and thus gather additional data. There were a number of issues however that led me to the decision that I would not organise interviews at the time. Students had expressed their reluctance to return to the university voluntarily after the last official day of classes. The main reason for this was that it was Ramadan, which is a period of fasting from sunrise to sunset (and also abstaining from drinking water). This was extremely difficult to do when the outside temperature often exceeded 45oc. Students understandably did not wish to venture out into the sunlight to travel to the

Institution. I also felt that some students might have been apprehensive about expressing themselves in a focus group when they were still to receive their final grades for the course, especially considering that I was one of the assessors of their work.

Sampling

Given that the sample was rather small – it consisted of only two classes (31 students completed the course) and two teachers, incautious generalizations from this sample to the wider population cannot be made. For example, my findings may not be the same for other populations of students in the GCC. In addition, the type of institution at which this research took place is unique, in that it was established as a type of technical college, predominantly for Government school students, as the tuition fees are extremely low. Despite these points, this research offers insight into the current educational situation in Bahrain, and may encourage other researchers in the GCC to conduct their own similar research into whether high school students in their country are also graduating with very limited analytical skills and critical literacy.

Significance of the Course

Although I devised and delivered a single stand-alone course, its significance as a beginning point for research into critical literacy in Bahrain and across the wider GCC should not be discounted. My research will hopefully act as a springboard from which other action research can be undertaken. Here, several suggestions for other practitioners who are keen to teach critical literacy in similar contexts can be made. One is that they could incorporate critical literacy input into students' existing language classes. However, this is often difficult to do because language classes often prepare students to sit international language exams (as has been discussed earlier in this section), and these courses do not have analysis or critical literacy as a focal point. I would argue that this is something that needs to change in the future. It is also possible to plan a series of workshops hosted by institutional Language Centres. One advantage of offering workshops is that they would remain voluntary and students would be

invited to sign-up if they were interested. There are ethical arguments which support making attendance at such courses optional, as critical literacy requires students to navigate some risky territory, and some societies could regard this as at least veering towards the unacceptable and/or censorable.

Areas for Future Research/Development in my Context

In my own context, the institution opted to run the critical literacy Elective again in semester 2, 2018-19. My Elective was not offered to students in 2017-18 because of staff shortages – there was not enough staff to teach the core courses and these had to take precedence over Elective courses. Offering the course to students again really attests to its overall success the first time it was taught. It also suggests that this is an area of study that is valued by the institution. Both Susan and I were asked to teach the Elective again, and Susan agreed. I declined, as I felt the need to distance myself from it because I had been working on it consistently for the past three years. As a result of conducting this action research project, I have also been approached by the Head of School for the Foundation Programme and invited to consider how we could incorporate a more critically literate dimension to the current English language programme for the 2019-2020 academic year. This demonstrates the willingness of management to allow for changes to programmes and/or curricula to guarantee an improved student learning experience by providing enhanced literacy opportunities. The next step would be to provide training for practitioners so that they can teach confidently and facilitate critical literacy in the classroom. I still believe that there are obstacles to introducing critical literacy in a language course but I would be prepared to try and tackle these.

Research in Similar Contexts

This research will hopefully encourage practitioners who are apprehensive about teaching critical literacy because of constraints that I have discussed previously at length, by demonstrating that it is indeed possible to incorporate critical literacy into practice in more challenging settings. This is as long as careful consideration is given to text selection and the attributes of the

teacher/practitioner. This piece of action research is a positive example of how a teacher who has acknowledged that she had limited knowledge of critical literacy can, given mentoring and self-motivation, successfully teach it.

Conclusion

This research has demonstrated that it is possible to teach critical literacy to students in Bahrain, a country that allows its citizens limited expression in political and social issues. In achieving this, very careful consideration had to be given to selection of texts, and class discussions had to be managed with sensitivity to the country. Some self-censorship had to take place by both students and teachers, but the fact that there was self-awareness of this suggests that students were developing criticality of thought, even though they could not necessarily express this. In the literature, more emphasis needs to be placed on the point that there are students in some parts of the world who have very limited analytical skills and these need to be firmly in place before the successful teaching of critical literacy can occur. All students should have the opportunity to become critically literate. This is because, without these skills, we become like pawns on a chessboard, moved around and positioned by those with the power to create 'text'. It is therefore recommended that leaders at the forefront of education focus the English Language curriculum on including analysis and critical literacy. Teachers and practitioners then have to be trained in what these mean and how to teach them effectively so that they can incorporate them into their lessons. The consequences of not doing so will be young people who are unable to make sense of the world around them and remain increasingly insulated.

Appendix 1

Excerpts from my Reflective Journal

Excerpt from 2nd March 2017

"Instead of having students select their own advertisement, perhaps it would be a better idea in the future to choose a stockpile of advertisements, perhaps ten, and have each group choose one for the group analysis task. This would save time regarding students searching for an advert, while at the same time ensuring the advert is appropriate for the task. Perhaps use real-life magazine adverts so they [students] can establish purpose/context, rather than using internet examples in isolation."

Excerpt from 20th March 2017

"One student said "reading critically can be biased though". When I asked what she meant, she said because you are always questioning things from your own point of view. I never considered this and I guess she has a point."

Excerpt from 22nd March 2017

"A couple of students (one female/one male) chose highly sexualised adverts that I said were inappropriate [for assessment 1]. One was Tom Ford's lipstick (male model) and the woman leaning in to kiss him. Public displays of affection are illegal in Muslim countries and can result in jail, as has happened to western tourists on occasion in Dubai, for example. These adverts, if in magazines here, would be blacked out. But because of the internet, students now have access to such material. Was I wrong to say no to it though? Goes against critical literacy. A male student chose Beyonce's Heat perfume advert. She is wearing a revealing red dress. He wanted to talk about the danger of seduction. I said I wasn't sure it was appropriate. The student next to him had selected a Chanel advert which showed a man in a suit being crowded by women in party clothes. I okayed that and the other student said "so it's okay if it's men, but not women". I feel really caught between the culture of the country and what is deemed appropriate according to religion, and what critical literacy is about. This is a problem and I feel that some students are becoming increasingly aware of this."

Excerpt from 28th March 2017

"We started off by looking at some quotes from the novel [*The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas]* and then some images, eliciting which gave us the most information. This was drawing on the theme from previous weeks', to start students thinking more about the visual signs and signifiers. I was worried slightly that this might be perceived as repetition and I would risk not gaining student interest, but actually students were very intrigued by the quotes and the images and seemed to enjoy making educated guesses regarding the storyline."

Excerpt from 26th April 2017

"Lord of the Flies: comprehension and discussion. I feel frustrated that I'm having to spend time on comprehension but students have expressed difficulty in understanding the novel, so it is important to make sure they have a strong foundational understanding before proceeding towards a more critical analysis. Otherwise it will be meaningless."

Excerpt from 15th May 2017

"Language and Identity: when discussing the idea of power – what power do you have and how can you use it in a positive way – I was surprised by how many students answered that they felt they did not have any power in any aspects of their life. Is this cultural? In the West, moving on into higher education is often seen as a right of passage, with students often leaving home and living in halls, often in different cities from their hometown. There is [Institution X] Student Council. When I mentioned this they [the students] said they [the Student Council] don't do anything. It is true that they have very little presence on campus."

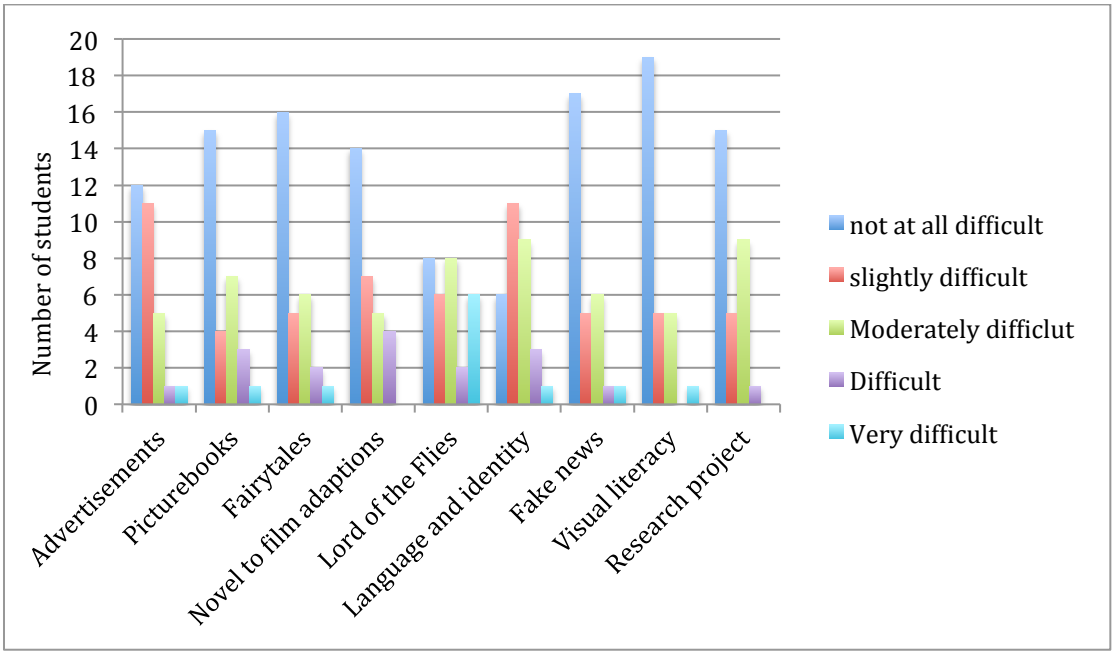
Excerpt from 5th June 2017

Freej: "They [students] asserted it was based in Dubai because there are not many Emirati's there and they need to be represented. Also touched on differing audience perspectives e.g. "Foreigners think of Dubai as the New York of the Middle-East". They discussed the clashes between the old and the new generations but it was interesting that they could not say why there was such a struggle, other than "they want us to be like them".

Appendix 2

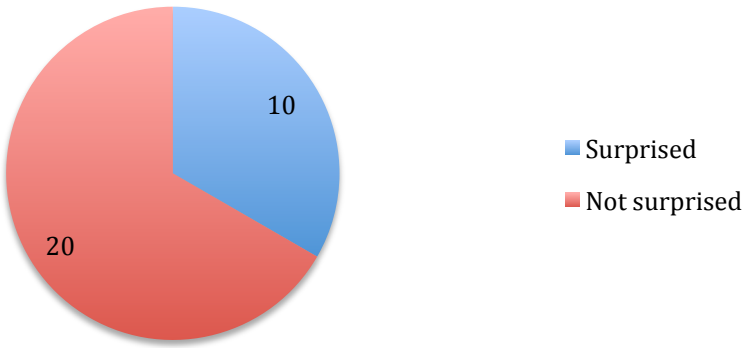
Descriptive statistics from pre- and post-course survey questionnaires

Figure 1.1 Difficulty of Topics



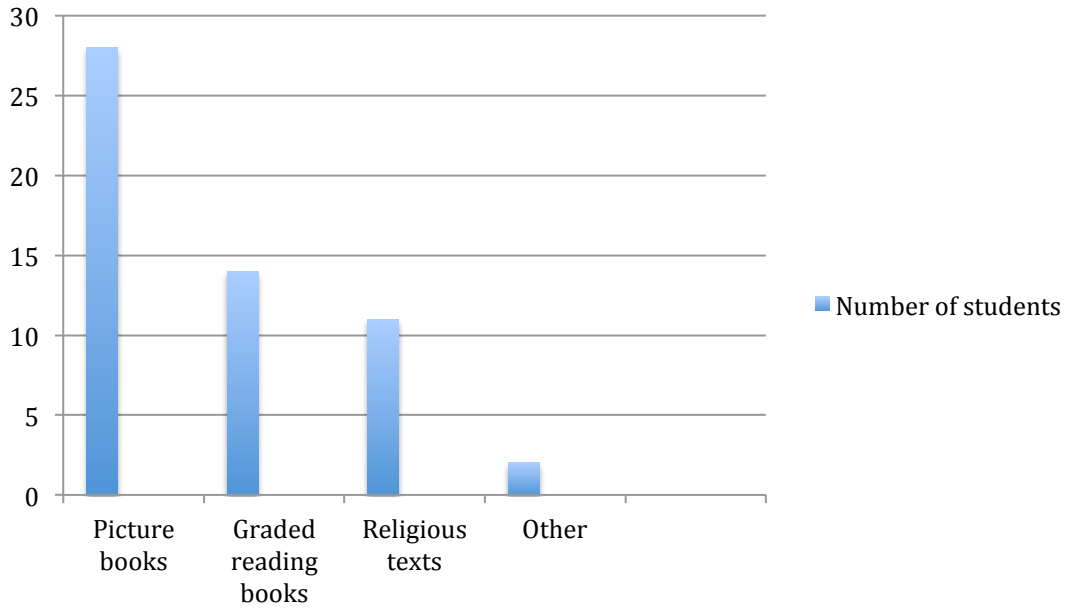
This table shows how difficult students found each of the taught course topics, with Lord of the Flies proving to be the most difficult of all. Fake news and Visual literacies were found by students to be not at all difficult.

Figure 1.2 Text types



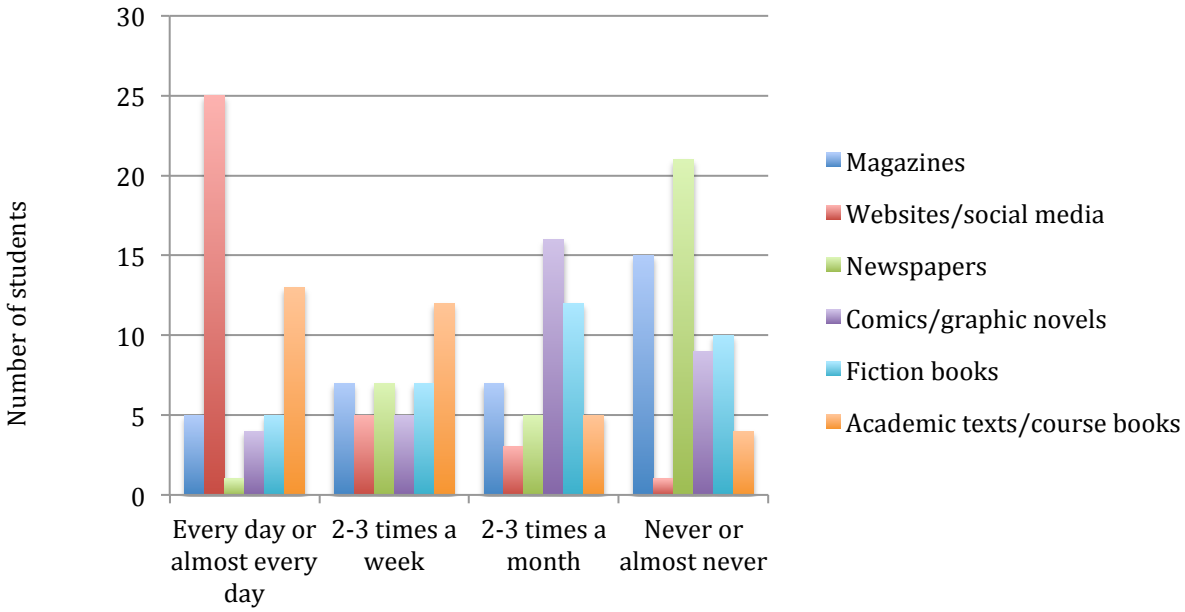
This chart denotes the number of students who were surprised by the types of texts used to teach the course.

Figure 1.3 Reading in Arabic



Students here were asked what texts were used to teach them how to read in Arabic. Under 'other', one response was that the student did not learn Arabic, and the other was that the student's Aunt taught them.

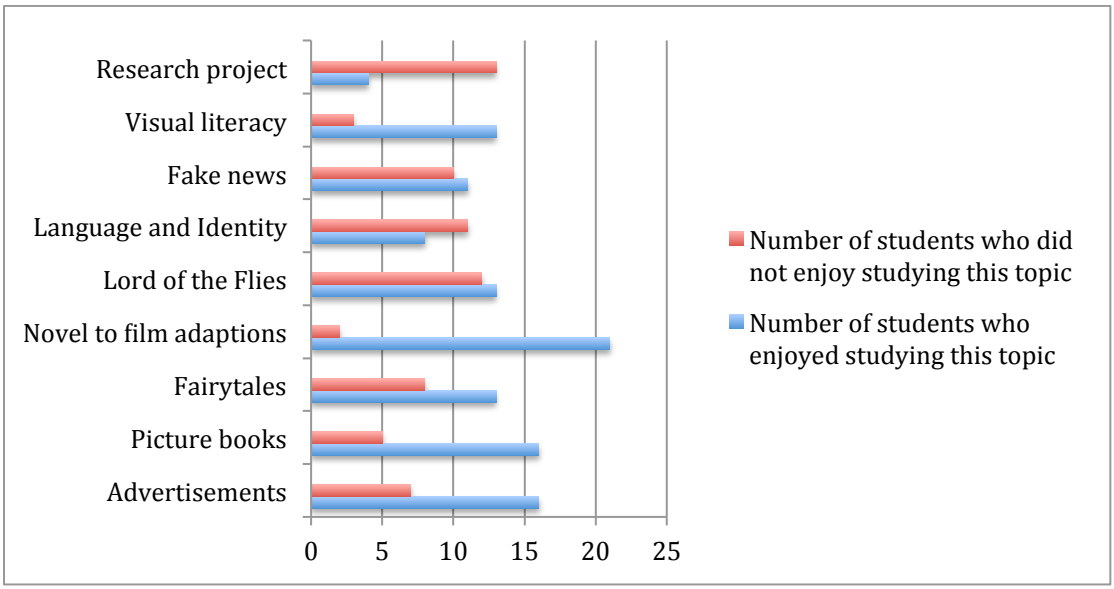
Figure 1.4 Genre and frequency



This chart reveals how frequently students read the different genre's of text. Websites/social media was the most frequently read by most students. When it

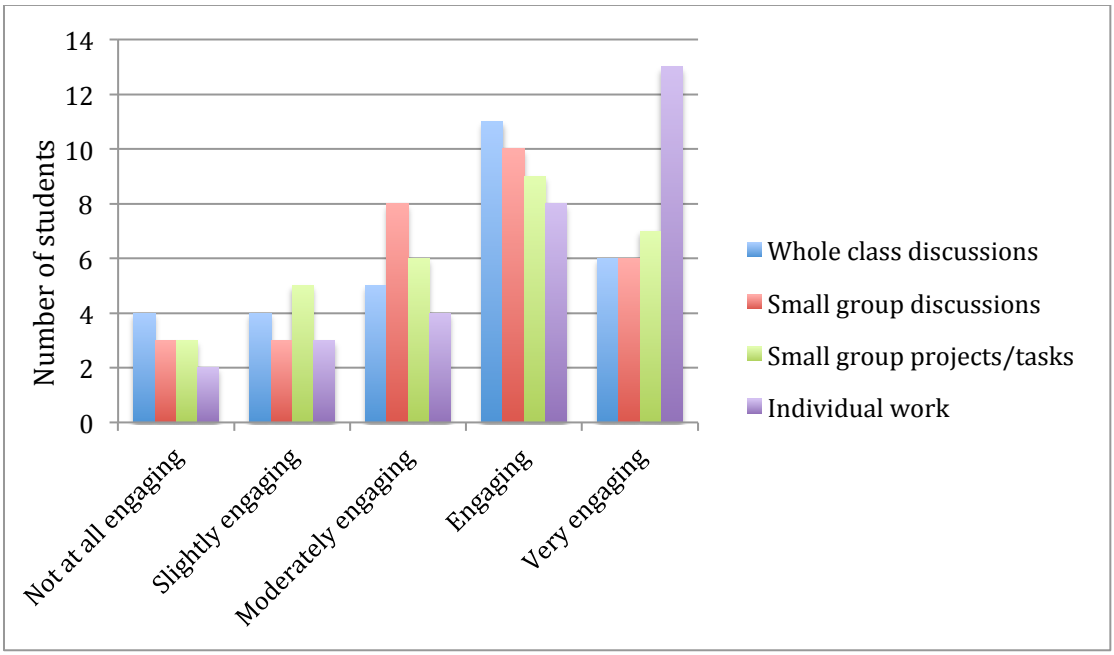
came to texts that students never or almost never read, newspapers and magazines scored the highest number of students.

Figure 1.5 Enjoyment rates



This chart contrasts the number of students who enjoyed studying each taught topic of the course with the number of students who did not enjoy studying each topic. Novel to film adaptions was the most enjoyed, and the research project was the least enjoyed.

Figure 1.6 Teaching methods



The extent to which students found different teaching methods engaging is depicted above. Individual work was found to be most engaging to students, but whole class discussions and small group discussions also fared well.

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